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BACK BRAIN RECLUSE

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The Water Man: Ursula Pflug

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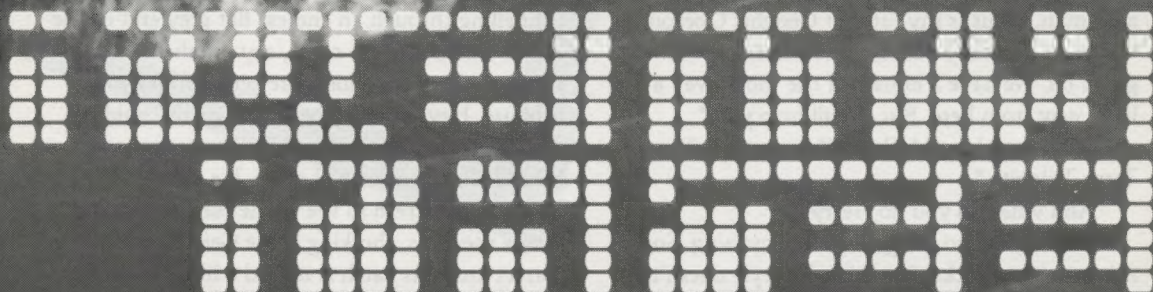
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BBR Review

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Joey Mollusc

and the Cepheid

The night swings forward and back on the hinges of storm. A Japanese hatchback hisses to a halt, a fine example of carkind the blue-green of a ripe bruise.

The window horizontals down. "Where to?" invites the voice from within.

Joey Mollusc insinuates his head into the dryness, spraying wet. "North."

She says "North'?"

The man at the wheel says, "That's 'up' on the map, isn't it?"

Joey glances at the dash. The Tranaccai is there. He smiles as the door opens to admit him.

"A bad night. Where North? Livchester? Manpool? You have friends up there?" she speaks jerkily, as if full of nervous energy, turning in her seat to watch him as he squeezes in.

"Yes. Yes – that's right." He runs a hand through his wet and wiry shock of hair in a self-conscious manner as he sinks into the rear-seat upholstery, slouching down in the 'leather animal with dead eyes' posture that, he feels, women always find so mysteriously attractive.

There's a powerful THRAAAAK of acceleration as the hatchback rejoins the main carriageway, wipers beating irritably. A speed that open-mouths him.

"My name is Titania," says the dark mouse of a woman. "This is my brother Genghis Oberon. We don't normally pick up hitchhikers. We're not going far. We have a house off the motorway a little way from here. But it will help you."

"Yes," says Joey Mollusc. "My name is Terry, Terry Trilobite."

"And what do you do, Terry?"

"I'm the Lizard King, I can do anything. Sure, it has its drawbacks. But what lifestyle doesn't?"

She laughs dutifully. "And what medication are you on, Terry?"

Through the contraflows there are lanes marked out in rain-glistening cones, and slow slithering columns of dull amber taillights. Beyond them shadows of monolithic road resurfacing machinery lurch, shiver, then steady again through sheets of rain. Rips of storm throw tangles of conflicting shadows crawling inside the car's cell of calm. In the rippling light she notices that his eyes are unnaturally large, as if dilated with digitalis. Conversation drifts inconclusively like cool fog.

After seventeen minutes the direction indicator pulses and they drift left up the slip road. "We can drop you here Mr Trilobite, unless you'd care to come back with us? It's such a bad night after all."

There's a silence, a sort of audial shift in which the radio goes BZAT BZANG BZAACK, and then resettles to a different station. In the silence every sound has a different shape.

They skid sharply right from the slip road, then again onto a narrow track that winds on skewback gradients between high hedges, degenerating into a mere cart track that winds steeply upwards. They pass a dark farmhouse, and then the track almost peters out. Beyond is open moorland. The sky is dense with storm, the car tunnelling through an endless flat grey end-of-the-world wilderness. By night, sky unrelieved by stars or moon, the moors are eerie, thinks Joey Mollusc. Hey, any number of assassins could be concealed and waiting in those hard edges and behind all that drenched gorse. He rubs a crosshatch pattern in the condensation forming across the glass, thinking if the Gaia hypothesis is correct and this Earth is indeed a living organism,

Andrew Darlington

Variable

this waste of a place has got to be its arse end.

Set like a rock in an ancient landscape, a spidery house lies beyond a long drive. It might have begun as a crude farmhouse built of drystone, but various unco-ordinated attempts at modernisation and extension have been made in conflicting styles and decades, resulting in piers and gables born of a drug addict's diseased imagination. But time and scouring wind have worn away even the newer corners and angles, smoothing them into a blurred and tiered uniformity. In this bleak place, thinks Joey Mollusc, daylight must be merely a less intensely dark darkness. As if it lies outside of time. The building seems to be the only wakeful thing in a sleeping world.

"A house on the edge of a steep cliff," says Titania. "The natural habitat for a precipitous man."

Genghis Oberon brakes the blue-green hatchback to a halt.

The building inhales. The shadows draw back.

Before they enter, Joey looks up. Through the tides of cloud, and beneath the drip from the wet roof overhang, he glimpses a raft of unfamiliar stars.

In the lounge, she flounces down onto a leatherette sofa, knees drawn up to her chin, trying to look comfortable. She seems smaller than he'd imagined. Almost to the point of fragility. With long slender fingers.

"Tell us about yourself, Terry. What you do, what you don't do, what frightens you, what you regret. We want to know all about you." She speaks with eyes bright and eager.

He looks up, his attention wandering around the room as though following some imaginary bluebottle. There's a collage on the wall that looks

to be an original Richard Hamilton. "Personally, I feel that it's long been established that fluctuations in the Earth's magnetic field, brought about by the moon, influence the brain. Sometimes it feels as though my brain's on fire. Don't you ever feel that way?"

On the glass-top coffee table that divides them is a half-completed jigsaw of a scene from *The Wind in the Willows*. Except that, rather than assembling the picture from its separate pieces, the process seems to be to locate and replace coloured segments with black-and-white ones, so that gradually Ratty and Mole are fading into monochrome.

Genghis sits opposite him with a wary intensity, a weighty earnestness. "You're not from around 'these parts' are you Mr.... er ..."

"Mollusc. Joey Mollusc." The two sides of Genghis' face – he decides – don't quite match. The facial misalignment begins to intrigue him. But he shrugs. "'Here', 'there' – the trouble with this reality is that you just want to fast-forward through the bad bits, but you can't. Know what I mean? But this house, to me, has the vital element of tranquility."

Joey Mollusc runs his finger down the spines of paperbacks on the shelves above him.

"Mine," says Genghis smugly. "I'm creative. You too perhaps? I sequence music as well. I wrote a song called *Experimental Fish* based on themes from Cabaret Voltaire and Bo Diddley. I sampled the full range of vocal sounds from Elvis Presley's back catalogue and sequenced them digitally. There were problems. His voice changed, lost its original sharpness, deepened and became more stylised as he decayed into the '70s. So I had to achieve continuity by treating and distorting individual vocal sounds into consistency. It was a



long process, but eventually I had him singing my song. Perhaps you'd care to hear it?"

Mollusc shrugs. The two unmatched sides of Genghis's face, he considers, are conflicting personalities inhabiting the same body in a permanent state of mutual attrition. "Let's listen, and dream of edible police cars while we do so."

With the remote he fades the sound up. Presley's voice working the unfamiliar material warily. Joey looks down at the strange jigsaw. Perhaps he's misreading the object of the game? Perhaps they replace black-and-white segments with coloured ones, hence brightening and illuminating the completed picture?

They listen. "The music you listen to says a lot about you. And one day," says Joey Mollusc, "all shopping malls will sound like this."

Genghis stands up abruptly. "We must talk. Enough of your games. You know and I know we must talk. It's important."

Joey begins to feel the contagion of the other's unease. "Sure, Mr Oberon. There's no need for the melodramatics. Your cultural integration here has given you a most distasteful style of speech. So don't get so sentimental about this old chemical reaction called life. We talk. What do you offer by way of trade?"

He circles cautiously. "I just don't care. I really don't care. I'm going to tell the truth."

"The truth? Perhaps you feel that what can't be articulated does not exist? I'm not so sure."

"What could possibly persuade you, Mr Mollusc?"

He glances across to where Titania sits. "Joey. Please call me Joey." Now Joey senses the others' unease heighten as a dog sniffs out fear or anger.

A weak smile puckers her lips. "Sure Joey. So we ask you three questions. You give three

answers. Three totally truthful answers, in as far as truth is possible within the accepted vagueness of words and the fluid nature of the Simultaneous Worlds. Three precise exchanges without artifice or guise. You accept that, you do it, and we sleep together this night on your terms." Her smile smooths itself out.

"So ask."

Genghis sits down sharply. Faces him directly. "Where's your Tranaccai?"

"Never use one. That's your first question."

"Hold it there." He looks away. "Wait – you don't use a Tranaccai, but you're obviously familiar with the term. So what do you use?"

"No. We aren't dependent on external devices in the FBI – I'll explain to you the best I can." He pauses for dramatic effect. "Me, I tune in and out of Simultaneous Worlds. It's all to do with certain procedures involving microsurgery to the frontal lobes of the brain, what is termed the Fissure of Sylvius. A minor trepanning of bone and its replacement with engineered cells grown from certain colloidal cultures. So we don't need external devices 'cos it's all locked into the phospholipids of the cerebrum. You dig?"

"FBI?" she said, then hurriedly, "no, that's not the third question."

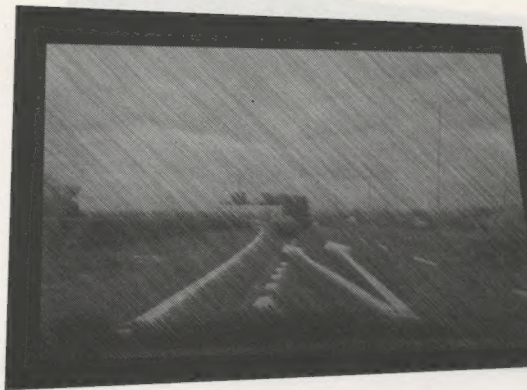
He laughs. "Fantasy Bureau of Investigation. A mere jest on my part."

"Where are you from," said Genghis, fixing him with a stare, his tapering eyebrows rising.

"Right here. I'm from right here."

In the darkness, a spark of deep fire, a half-covered jewel, the clean brilliance of ice.

Joey Mollusc wakes with a start. Sometimes he imagines he's dreaming photographs of



falling slowly, and a long long way down. But now he's sure that some unusual sound has reached his ears. So what do you do about it? You lie motionless, eyes wide, listening. You feel her beside you. Her skin smooth. She'd shaved her legs this morning, as if in anticipation of tonight. As if she'd known. Once, during the night following the violence of lovemaking, you thought you'd heard a tapping at the window, but it soon tiptoed away to nothing. Probably wind disturbing the bushes. Then again you sense rain shaking the window in its frame.

You dress as noiselessly as possible, but every creak and small sound seems amplified to alarming proportions.

You draw the curtain back.

From the window the cliffs fall away to a distant turquoise sea. A precipice of a cliff. A precipitous man. Creatures move in the shimmer of languorous tide. Slow. There's a moon. Then, with startling abruptness, and a clearly visible motion, there's a second. A green world rising – twice, three times the size of the first, a glowing disc marked with the dark configurations of mountains, seas, and storming bands of cloud. Stars pale about it. A flood of yellow light shocks across the sea in broad paths of rippling gold. The smaller moon moves across the face of the larger.

You smile. The soft inflow of alien light altering the contours of the room.

You feel the chill of the window before it reaches you. A deathly sadness of space with sparse stars. Diamond-hard points of methane ice prism in the moonrise about the clifftop. You think, perhaps Saturn, and this is ... Titan?

Perhaps not: the silent roar of storms in equatorial bands are too green. And there are so many simultaneous solar systems out there.

The waves pounding on the raw cliff are the beating of a monstrous heart. You feel your own body rhythms adjusting to its tempo.

What now? She still appears to be sleeping. You pace back to the bed and cover her bare shoulder with the duvet. Sensing the secret warmth in the folds of her body. Then you move across the room to ease the door back silently. You're back in the lounge, but its shapes are spooky silhouettes.

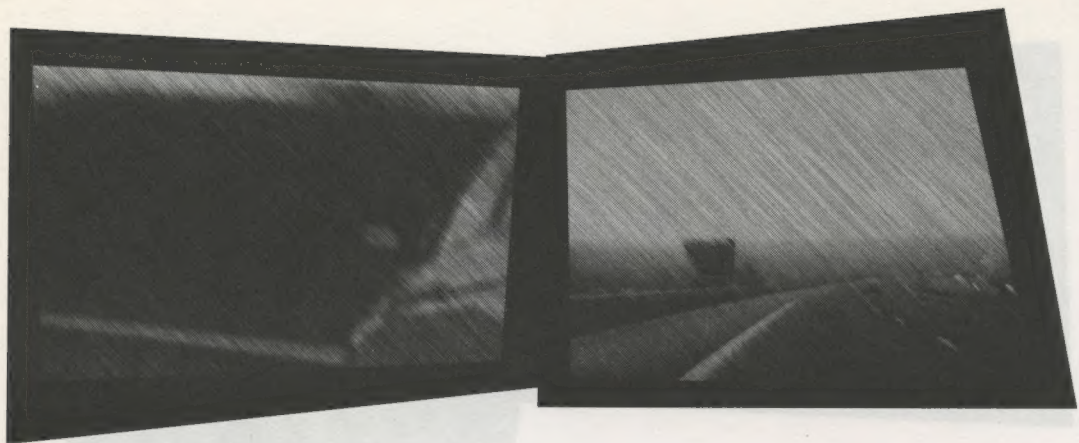
The Richard Hamilton poster is gone.

You move to a side door. Why slink like an assassin? This is the ignition of life, not its extinction. The door swings back. There's the hum of generators. A low electric-blue strip light illuminating shelves of large jars filled with brightly coloured fluids.

"KUK-KUR-KURIK." You startle back. In a pet-basket a small elephant about the size of a dog hefts itself up, waving its truncated trunk in a non-too menacing fashion. Its body is striped in dull bands of colour. It stretches and lurches from its basket to approach you. It's then you realise the flasks contain human body parts. You pull the door shut, and continue.

A kitchen. The hatchback keys hang on a polished wooden panel elaborately patterned 'Genghis' in florid script. Joey smirks. There's a food blender. Spice racks, oregano, cinnamon, basil, thyme ...

You slip back the venetian blind. There's a short yard with a green plastic wheelie-bin, and the rusting carcass of a Lambretta. Immediately beyond the wall are the lower levels of a dark city where vehicle lights pulse like splintered starlight along elevated thoroughways between densely clustered glass and ferrocrete towers. Helijets flit above and below them. It's no city you recognise.



Even the squirming neon spells out unrecognisable characters. You slide the blind back.

Heft the keys into the palm of your hand. Time to go. You're sorry to leave the warmth of her body. And you don't really need the car. But why not?

Outside, beyond the long gloomy entrance hall, there are two worlds.

To your left there's nothing. Still. Deathly still. Your eyes will never become accustomed to this murk. Because it's more than just murk. It's utter blackness, not a single photon in existence. To your right, the Japanese hatchback. A fine example of carkind. The asphalt single-track road is paced by regular telegraph poles to the heat-shimmering horizon. It moves between a featureless scrub of ochre grit. There are scrawls of spiny bushes and tumbleweed throwing long shadows in the watery sunlight.

You look back at the house just once. They didn't see you leave. Maybe they did. What's that suggest? They knew what it was all about from the start? Sure they did. That's the point. The house lies like a folded velvet ribbon between elms. And between worlds.

There's a powerful THRAAAK of acceleration as the hatchback pulls off the verge and onto the highway with a zigzag that would do credit to a ten-day binge. And a speed that open-mouths you. When all is said and done, a car with Tranaccai is more difficult to handle than one with simple piston-drive. But it feels good. This is a decent lick.

Soon there's nothing but car, highway, and exhalations of exhaust. You glance down at the dash. The weak sunlight bathes it a gentle primrose. You've no means of telling how far to thumb the disassembler, beyond blind chance.

Think. There are two people in the house, Genghis and Titania. And there's you. That makes three. By all the discredited black arts, you take it to the third setting. That's a good idea. Now steer as best you can along the line, drop the drags full down, don't worry about the shock wave, slow the brute a fraction.

The hum of ultrasonic vibration works its way through your head as the Tranaccai takes you through, clouds of lepidoptera take flight through your intestines. They leave your stomach a sudden vacuum.

Shattered buildings shunt in at both sides of the highway. Shells of smashed stores, office blocks and apartments. An avenue of rusting metals. You feel the imagined rain of radiation on your skin. The sky is huge chemical reactions of fire. Ragged survivors squat on the kerb-edge. They glance at the Japanese hatchback with dull emptiness in their eyes. This is the correct materialisation, yet still within the same mix of space-time you could loosely call the monoverse.

After a while your brain begins to function properly again. It's only now that you allow yourself the luxury of self-congratulation. Kidding around. The mission was a good one. Quick, simple, resourceful. Contact was made. Copulation occurred. She's made you pregnant. You return with the seed of life to a place where conception is no longer possible.

Yet as you throttle down between blowing trash and wreckage you think of Titania. Her face in your peri-screen. She's thinking of you, and she's crying softly.

You reach out for her. You say, "Hey, don't cry. Crying makes your nose run."

And she smiles. Her breath has broken glass in it.

Junior Achievement

by Don Webb

My girlfriend Julie isn't human. She has an eighteen-inch tongue. We can French around corners and she gives the best blow jobs in town. She can wrap her tongue around my dick thirteen times. Then she pulls it off slowly but at an everincreasing rate. I shoot off at the end, and she catches my sperm like a frog a fly. Her brother's pretty great too. He did me once when I'd just finished a piss. He's mainly into girls - human girls - but he did it to give me a scare. He'd walked up behind me and suddenly something had my dick.

Their gods are not human either and I like that. Mainly they worship Ib, a lizard god. They made him out of malachite, a banded green stone. They worshiped him a long time before they made contact with the Ib-principle. You gotta cut through lines of time and association if you want to get to a new god. They have another god called Raz. He's shaped like a toad - carved from bloodstone. Raz is the god of revenge. There was this math teacher we all hated. Mr Burnett. He was really hard on Boyd, my girlfriend's brother, 'cause Boyd was always after him to teach nonEuclidean geometry and the calculus of variation and nonlinear programming. He hated Boyd 'cause Boyd knew more math than he did. We set up an altar on a hill overlooking Mr Burnett's house. We set Raz on the altar and the three of us joined hands until Raz sent us a dream. When more than one person has the same dream you know it is the god. We gathered stinging nettles and poison ivy - we wore heavy gloves and rain jackets so the plants wouldn't burn our skin and bandannas to avoid inhaling their acidic juices. We heaped the plants on the altar and doused them with lighter fluid. We waited until a cool wind was blowing downhill right into Mr Burnett's house. Then we lit them. As they burned we chanted the praises of Raz Red God of Destruction. The wind carried our voices as well as the stinging smoke. The smoke took on forms. Flying octopi. The smoke seeped into his house, down his chimney and under the cracks of his windows.

Soon the screaming started. The poison ivy smoke had entered his lungs and blistered their sensitive pinkness. Our chants entered his ears and drove him mad.

He had to leave the school for several months. The principal let Boyd teach the class. We studied chaos theory and nonEuclidean geometry and information theory. We began building models of chaotic systems like weather and elections. We predicted things. This thunderstorm. That council seat. The townspeople became a little afraid of us, because they confused prediction with actually causing the event. We encouraged that fear, because the more they feared us the harder they worked to make our predictions come true.

Boyd got mad at my sister because she wouldn't put out. So we made a god of a mushroom-shaped piece of brown quartzite. And we called this god Om. I stole one of her panties soiled by menstrual blood. And we wrapped Om in it and buried him for nine days. Then Julie dug him up. She kept the god in her pocket and went horseback riding with my sister. After the ride Julie seduced my sister. And after my sister had experienced the wonders of the eighteen-inch tongue, she was more than glad to please Boyd in any way she could. My sister became a priestess of Om and led many boys and girls into the cult.

We began to control the schools through an underground. We stopped wearing black and greeting each other in a special way. We became flag-toting Americans. We knew one another through secret symbols of great subtlety. Anyone who struck against us struck against all of us. Some of the girls turned tricks for the local cops. Om had become greatly manifest in them and the cops would beg for more. By the might of Om we controlled them. They became an escort service. We would give them a call and have a police car to take us anywhere in the city.

Julie discovered a new god in the weed-infested field behind their house. A lump of clear volcanic glass. We named him Keth. Keth was the bringer of invisibility. He instructed us in telecommunication. With TV and radio you can pour your thoughts into the brains of the couch potatoes. TV sends a signal of 25,000 volts directly at the optic nerve.

Visual magic is strong stuff - look at great-great-grandpa's cave paintings. We made a tape for the local access TV station. They'll play anything. So we made a cartoon. Cinderella. Except we filled it with subliminals. Every time it played - and we asked them to play it late at night - when people's resistance was low - we performed an invisibility ritual. We got buttons printed up bearing the word Keth. We could saunter into all-night convenience stores, where tired Pakistanis had watched our cartoon five nights running. We could take anything. We were invisible.

The local mafia knew something was up. People were stealing and they weren't getting their cut. Finally a smart guy approached us. They wanted our secret. We told 'em to gather in a certain place. We would present the Law of Keth to them. We sent our cop friends to waste them. We brought law and order to our town. Our law. Our order.

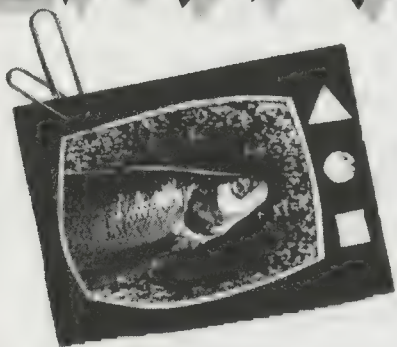
We made a large idol of Ib. We had to use greenstone because we couldn't find a large enough hunk of malachite. We placed it atop the bank building downtown. He was a fourth the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. Ib, god who sends quickening and increase, began to work on the minds of bankers. We came in for loans. The bankers, although they knew not why, responded to the Ib dwelling within us. Loans were easy. Boyd's models of the stock exchange made moneymaking child's play. So we put the eight- and nine-year-olds in charge of it. Those of us going through puberty were more interested in our body changes.

We weren't going to stop with the normal limitations that humankind is heir to. We wanted better sex, better senses, better minds. Julie and Boyd were just the beginning. Lucky mutants. We performed a mass ritual at the football stadium. A new god fell from the sky. A black meteor, a gift from the Principles of Outer Darkness. He is Xotol, God of Larval Change. Our DNA is our own. We reject not only society but its reality and its form. We have become too strange to be seen.

Mankind is neither the oldest nor the last of Earth's masters. Our hand is upon their throat. But they do not see us. They know us not.

For Stewart Home

THE WATER MAN



URSULA
PFLUG

The water man came today. I waited all morning, and then all afternoon, painting plastic soldiers to pass the time. Red paint too in the sky when he finally showed; I turned the outside lights on for him and held the door while he carried the big bottles in. He set them all in a row just inside the storm door; there wasn't any other place to put them. When he was done he stood catching his breath, stamping his big boots to warm his feet. Melting snow made little muddy lakes on the linoleum. I dug in my jeans for money to tip him with, knowing I wouldn't find any. Finally I just offered him water.

We drank together. It was cool and clean and good, running down our throats in the dimness of the store. It made me feel wide and quiet, and I watched his big eyes poke around Synapses, checking us out, and while they did, mine snuck a peek at him. He was big and round, and all his layers of puffy clothes made him seem rounder still, like a black version of the Michelin man. He unzipped his parka and I could see a name, Gary, stitched in red over the pocket of his blue coverall. I still didn't have a light on; usually I work in the dark, save the light bill for Deb. But I switched it on when he coughed and he smiled at that, like we'd shared a joke. He had a way of not looking right at you or saying much, but somehow you still knew what he was thinking. Like I knew that he liked secrets, and talking without making sounds. It was neat.

Seemed to me it was looking water – a

weird thought out of nowhere – unless it came from him. He seemed to generate them; like he could stand in the middle of a room and in everyone's minds, all around him, weird little thoughts would start cropping up – like that one. My tummy sloshing I looked too, and seemed to see through his eyes and not just mine. Through his I wasn't sure how to take it: a big dim room haunted by dinosaurs. All the junk of this century comes to rest at Synapses; it gets piled to the ceilings and covered with dust. If it's lucky it makes a Head; weird Heads are going to be the thing for Carnival this year, just as they were last, and Debbie's are the best. Her finished products are grotesque, but if you call that beautiful then they are; the one she just finished dangles phone cords like Medusa's hair, gears like jangling medals. Shelves of visors glint under the ceiling fixture; inlaid with chips and broken bits of circuitry, they hum like artifacts from some Byzantium that isn't yet. Two faced Janus-masks, their round doll eyes removed; you can wear them either way, male or female, to look in or out.

Gary was staring at them, a strange expression on his face. Like he wanted to throw up.

"Do you think they're good," I asked, to stop him looking like that.

"Good enough," he said, "if you like dinosaurs."

"I like them. They are strange and wonderful."

"But dinosaurs all the same," he said, his eyes glinting like the mosaic visors. I looked for the source of light on his face but couldn't find it. Maybe he was one of the crazy water men. You hear things, like that's the way they get sometimes; it comes from handling their merchandise too much. Fish-heads, people call them. After the deep ones, the ones that generate their own light.

"Whose water you gettin' now?"

"I never called a water man before today."

"What do you drink?"

"Town water. But I just couldn't do it any more."

"Yeah." It was sad, the way he said it.

"Only cold. For hot we have pots on the stove."

"Uh-huh. Baths down the street at the pool, am I right?"

"Showers, mostly. They don't clean the

tubs out too often."

"I guess not."

"I heard your water was the best," I said, threading through the junk to the desk where I keep my checkbook.

I am a little proud of them, my checks. My buddy and I designed them and he printed them up for me. They're real pretty, with phoenixes and watermelons. I had to clean his kitchen for a week in trade, but it was worth it.

Gary looked interested, his pop-eyes studying the tracery.

"What do I owe you for this fabulous water, Gare," I asked, punctuating my signature.

He moved his tongue around in his mouth so that his face bulged. A bulge here, a bulge there: his cheek a rolling ball.

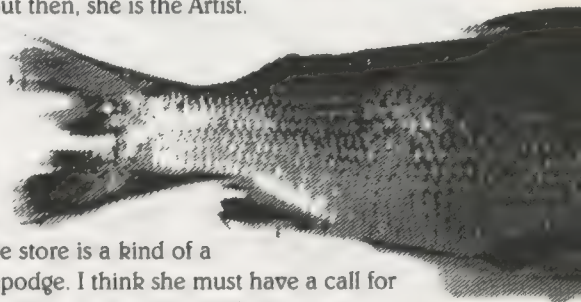
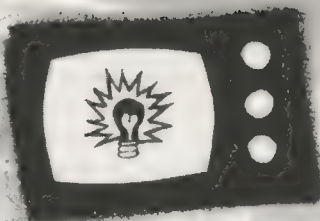
"That is some way-out bank you belong to, miss. What did you say it was called?"

"It doesn't have a name. It's my own personal bank. Very secure. These checks are not affected by the stock market."

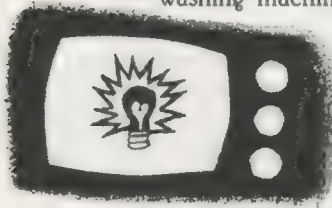
"And a good thing, too," he nodded, agreeing with me. But he had his doubts. "I tell you what, miss. First delivery's usually free. You see how you like the water, you let me know. But the deposit on the bottles, I got to have that." He glared at me, wanting cash.

I hemmed and hawed, took him on a tour of the premises. Thing was, we had no cash. Well, we had a little, but Deb took it this morning to get her hair done. Half a dozen places in town would rather do your hair on account, and Deb has to pick one that only takes jazz. She can be a prima donna that way. But then, she is the Artist.

The store is a kind of a hodgepodge. I think she must have a call for the garbage, like a dog whistle; a supersonic whine that only it can hear. Because she cares about it. Garbage is her job; Deb re-births obsolete appliances, toys, anything



thrown away, non-organic. The ones that don't biodegrade, not quickly. It's recycling, only more so; this way they get an extra life on their slow way back to Earth. She makes it into art: sculptures; costumes for Carnival; Heads, mostly. She takes hockey helmets, the domes from those old-style hair dryers, hats, headbands. Anything to go around a head. Hot glue gun, solder, she glues things to them: taken apart washing machines; orphan computers;



microwave ovens. The grunts love it. Come February, they buzz in here like flies, picking up a couple of Heads apiece. Grunts have to wear something new every night of Carnival. A good thing, too: jazz. When it first comes in, I just like to do nothing, holding it all morning. It makes my skin happy. Deb doesn't like it; I don't do any work. She comes home, I'm sitting on the floor, playing with the money. She yells, sends me out to the co-op for a year of rice and beans.

Gare and I passed a rack of toys. Thirty years of Christmas, stacked up to the ceiling lights. Between the caved in Atari monitors and the bins full of busted Go-Bots, almost like an anachronism, was a shoe box of those little plastic domes where the snow is always falling. Gary stopped and picked one out, held it up to the light; a striped yellow fish danced among ferns. Once there had been a thread holding it suspended, but now it floated on its side: gills up, dead. He turned it over and over, like if he just waited long enough, and prayed hard enough, that fish would leap to life.

"It's nice," I said, my feet betraying me, shifting me from one to the other. "I don't think I ever noticed it before."

"Nice? It's amazing! You don't know how long I've been looking for something like this! Look, here's the slot for the battery. It's got a light bulb - this one lights up in the dark!"

"So it does." His enthusiasm made me edgy. I waved the check like a slow flag, hoping he'd change his mind about my watermelons.

But he didn't. "Look, miss. I'll take this fish for the deposit. But from now on it's got to be jazz. If you want to keep getting the water."

"Hmm. Maybe town water's not so bad."

He laughed. "It's your funeral."

"I'll give you a call, Gare."

"Sure. If you can find me."

I'd gotten off easy and he was mad. It was just his luck I'd had something he wanted. "Thank you for coming so soon after I called," I said, trying to placate him.

"It's very rare," he grumped. "Collector's material. I can sell it for a week of jazz uptown."

But you won't.

"No problem. I didn't even know we had it."

"No kidding." It was that look again, only in his voice; his hand wrapped around the toy, like he was saving it from something. From me. What did I care. He was almost out the door and then he stopped, staring at the shelves of Heads again. "You make those?"

"I put them together. But my partner, she's the designer."

"She a healer, right?"

"Uh-huh."

"It shows." He nodded at the Heads, looked down at his opened hand, at the fish. He chuckled. It made me look at him, his handsome face, a big grin cutting it in two. You wanted to like him when he grinned. And his hands knocked me out. The brown backs opening to velvet palms, soft and shocking-baby pink. Yeesh. I wished I could have hands like that.

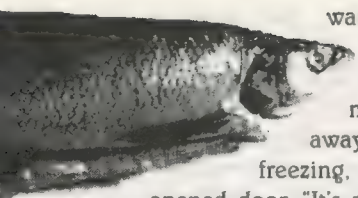
He did his other voice, cradling the fish like a baby. "I is going to fix this fish," he crooned. "This is a poor sick fish and needs mending."

The guy was not for real. But his water. "You a fish doctor too, Gare?" I asked, only half sarcastic. He turned on like a light bulb when I said that.

"That's very good, dear. Very, very good." He laughed, a happy laugh from deep

down, and for once he didn't look like I made him sick. I was even afraid he





wanted to give me a hug: his huge padded arms windmilling towards me like that. I backed away into the warmth; it was freezing, standing there in the opened door. "It's a kind of a sideline, my fish doctoring," he explained. "Like a fiddle. You know what a fiddle is?"

"Yeah, yeah," I said. "Economics 101." I slammed the door while I had a chance. He grinned, turning to cross the road; his feet leaving boat-sized holes in the slush. In the middle he stopped to turn and wave again. He was still chuckling when he gunned the van, his big head rolling like it was on bearings. "Pure spring," read the hand-lettered sign on the side. "A drink for sore throats." Weird. Like "a sight for sore eyes."

* * *

Three weeks to go. Deb sleeps at the studio, brings me the new designs in the morning. Flavour of the week is headbands; I've been stringing plastic soldiers onto lengths of ribbon cable. You know the stuff: rows of tiny coloured wires all stuck together, for connecting computers and all. When they're strung each soldier is painted to match a different strand of wire. "Rainbow Warrior," Deb calls 'em.

Two grunts came in this morning and bought Heads. Red Heads, blue Heads; colour is big this year. One also bought a box of old electronic parts, said he wanted to make his own. An arty grunt, yet. He was pale and like his friend wore a grey knee-length wool coat. They both looked young. But lately it seems like all the grunts look young: young and spooked.

They made half-scared google-eyes, told me it was their first time in a place like this: strictly non-grunt. Said they worked for banks. Tellers, must be: coats too thin for managers. It almost doesn't rate as a grunt job, being a bank teller. Too servile. Seems like it takes less and less to be a grunt these days. How sad.

"You mean there still is banks," I asked, doodling on my creative checkbook. I know there is still banks; I just wanted to make them nervous. I'm bad when it comes to young grunts. But jobs. For money. Geez.

* * *

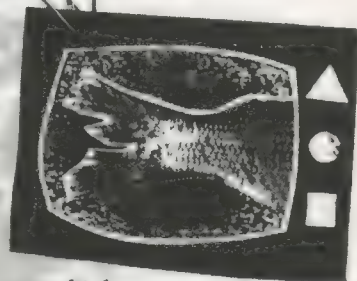
The secret life of grunts. I do wonder what they think about. They must be on town water. I can't imagine ordering it in and still being a grunt. I can't remember ever even wanting to be a grunt, but I guess grunts want to be grunts. They must. Or else why would they? It's not like you have to be a wage slave. There are other ways.

Another one came in this morning: a creepy older one. He bought my window. It's something I do to relax, when I'm on break from Deb. I climb into the display window and arrange the junk into scenes, make a little Chaos out of the Order. Or is it the other way around? I forget which. Anyway, this time I'd found a plastic Doberman and hot-glued its mouth to Barbie's crotch. I know there are worse things on this earth than a little dog cunnilingus, but even Deb thought it was maybe a little much. The grunt, however, loved it, asked me if I did gift-wrap. I did: ripping a strip of red off the velvet curtains left over from Synapses' previous incarnation I tied it around the dog's neck. He loved it, he told me, in that creepy voice; he loved the store and he loved me. "Sure," I said, but I had to get a glass of water right after he left just to get over his face. Maybe that's how it happens to grunts; they get old when the inside faces out too long, when instead of being scared they're scary. And to think I cater to that market. Veeagh.

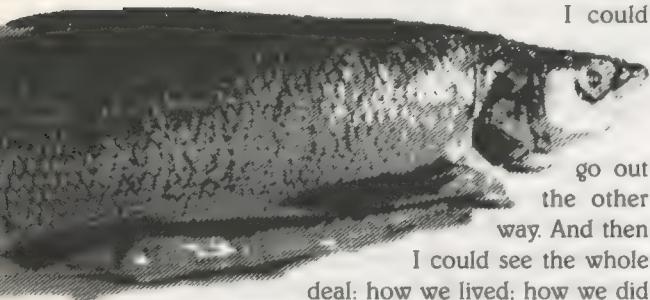
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I used to think all water was the same. It was what you drank for breakfast, had a little coffee to stir in if you were lucky. It was a grunt drink.

From Gary I learned otherwise. This morning I brought a quart up to the kitchen where I was working. I heated it up on the stove, and sort of meditated, tried to think how Gary would think it if he was doing the thinking. While I was waiting I amused myself pushing the eyes into a couple of old dolls. I sliced the faces off, attached them one to another with bands of elastic. One male doll, one female, the way you're supposed to do them. A type of Janus. It's not a big seller, but it's lasted; every year we do a few. When the water was warm I put the mask on and drank, using a straw. I'd pierced the lips for straw holes -



grunts won't buy anything they can't drink in. The water went down, warm and wet, and I felt like there were revolving doors inside me, turning, and all of a sudden I could



go out the other way. And then I could see the whole deal: how we lived; how we did up our place; what we wore and what we ate: it was all because of drinking the town water. And this thing about getting your own water, it really worked. I could see how tacky it was: Synapses, Deb's and my life. A cheesy, no-class deal, except for some of the Heads. Like the Janus Head. It was clean, a nice idea made flesh. I kept it on, poking around the place, looking out the eyes of Gary's water. It was fun. I saw things I hadn't seen before, like which things fit together and how come. I poked around in shoe boxes all afternoon, looking at junk.

Every day they bring more in. I wonder where it all comes from. Junk out of plastic, junk out of metal. They don't make so much junk as they used to, but boy, when they did, was it ever a going concern. It must have employed thousands of people, the junk industry. I wonder where they got the raw materials from. I mean, what is that cheap-o plastic made of, anyway? What natural substance has been humiliated in its service? I kind of got lost in the beauty of it, the beautiful ugliness of the cheap plastic objects I was handling. It occurred to me then they were beautiful precisely because they were ugly, and I even know a few people like that. And the more my thoughts headed off in that direction the gladder I became I work for Deb. Because, you know, I used to feel sorry for them. We'd be shopping for clothes at Thrift Villa or wherever, and there'd be shelves full of broken-down toasters and waffle irons, and I'd think how nobody cared about them, not even my Mom. Everyone always wanting the new one: clean ones, without any

scratches or deformities, in good working order and with high IQs. That is why I love Deb so much. She was the first person to see that all that old stuff wanted to still be used; it wanted so badly to have a purpose for us. So Deb thought and thought of how to use it, and finally she came up with the whole style of wearing garbage to Carnival, and now everyone does it, us and all the grunts.

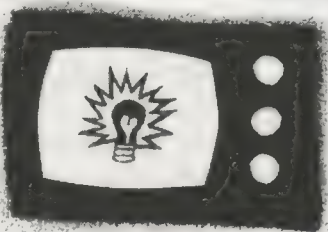
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Things have been different lately. I don't know why. Funny thoughts come to me while I work. That we are like fish in an aquarium, looking out at the world. I think it's since Gary came that it's been different. I never did any of that computing but my buddy Danny, the one who does the checks, he told me it is like that. Programming. It is like going into inner space. And I think maybe Gary's water is like that too, like going into space. To think I never knew. No wonder he was looking at me like that.

* * *

Two weeks. Carnival soon. I've started a new window. I work on it during breaks. TV sets done up like aquariums. Somehow they look the same: a clear glass box. I have a milk crate full of plastic fish; I string them from the inside of the TVs so they look like they're swimming. Take the picture tubes out, of course. And one real aquarium. A glass fishbowl I found upstairs that fits perfectly into one of the smaller TVs. I went down to Woolco and bought live fish for it. I paid for them with some of the grunt money. The dog-grunt money, to be precise. I lied to Deb, told her Danny gave them to me, that I washed his floors for him. She doesn't like me doing anything that costs money. Also she doesn't understand I have to make my own art sometimes. The windows. That's my art. That and the thoughts, the weird water ones.

* * *



Out of water. Once you get the new water, it's hard to go back to the old. I haven't thought so much in years. Even Deb likes me better, gives me time off in the afternoons to work on the window. It's very beautiful, now, almost finished. I wonder how I ever did dogs and dolls. I could never go back to that

now. Phoned Gary but there was no answer. Shit. Town water sucks.

* * *

Don't forget to dream. To bring in the new world. Otherwise the old one just keeps rolling on. Death as predecessor to rebirth. The seed, sleeping in the earth. The purpose of winter. Subtle changes taking place, deep in the darkness underground. Winter, Carnival, bringing back the sun. New windows. Fish-televisions? But what is the death? The underworld. Being fish. What will we be, when we're not fish?

* * *

First day of Carnival. The grunts pour into the street, displaying their wares. Who will buy, and who will be bought? The one time of year they get to ease up. Bread and circus. For two weeks they live what is ours the whole year through. I felt so still, so empty inside. Deb was out, being photographed for something. I sat in the window, watching the grunts parading, wearing their garbage regalia. They were beautiful: moving in slow motion, with dream smiles on their faces. They looked happy. I recognized some of their Heads as ones we'd done. They smiled and waved at me, sitting among my fish-TVs. Who is looking in and who is looking out. It is like the Janus mask. Tomorrow I will wear it.

* * *

I feel so still. In Carnival they act it out, the death and rebirth. But this year it's like it's real: Janus-eyes in the back of my head. Gary came. He grinned and gesticulated, stamping his feet on the other side of the glass. He waved his hands. I wanted to see it, his beautiful skin, but he was wearing mitts. He brought the water. He carried it into the window where I was sitting, and we each had some. It was cool and clean and good, running down our throats in the cold morning. When we weren't thirsty any more he made me come outside, showed me how Synapses' window was like a television too, or an aquarium, and I the fish in it. I knew where there was a big box of grease crayons in the back, and we drew it onto the glass: the outline of the screen and the control panel. I

even found a fish costume in a drawer of stuff Deb did before there were Heads. He sat beside me for a long time, and we looked out the window, part of the display. A big quiet black man and a thin white girl dressed up as a fish. The Carnival faces passed us, a white dressed throng, wearing Heads made of all their old stuff, and I was content as I've ever been. Finally understanding it, the meaning of Carnival. The old flesh dying to the new. They passed with the skeleton then, an effigy held high above their heads.

"Whose death is it this time, Gare?" I asked.

He put his big mitten out, covering my knee. "It is the death of Death."

"And the birth of Life?"

"Yes."

"That's what I thought. I'm glad I'm here to see this one."

"It is an interesting time."

He rose stiffly in his great padded knees, wearing a parka and thick quilted pants like always.

"I will be going then."

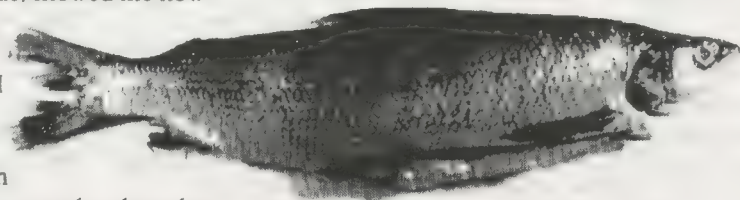
"I'm glad I know you, Gary."

"I, too. I will be coming by from time to time, to see how you are doing."

"Goodbye, Gary, goodbye."

* * *

Roses. It will be the next window. Flowers will bloom out of all the televisions there are. In the meantime it snows. Soft white snow falling like it does in a plastic bubble of fish, its string repaired. It sits on top of one of the televisions, where Gary left it for me to discover. Its light bulb glows softly in the darkening day. □



The Shop

Things have been slow at the mine. So Bulldog has laid off his job there to help George Nevil put together the shop.

George has been talking about that shop for a long time. He's got a lot of good equipment, and it's seen a good deal of use. But he hasn't had a very efficient setup in the past.

Another attraction of the shop is winter. Like most good mechanics, George is always getting inspired about five o'clock in the afternoon. A place to work with good light and well enough enclosed to get some heat out of a fire is his idea of high luxury.

George and Bulldog have been working hard. There's been concrete pouring and hammering and welding and all sorts of productive noise. That shop's beginning to look pretty spiffy too. And if it's possible to be a better mechanic than George, Bulldog is it.

However, George has been going around looking irritable. We wondered if there was some problem over the work – sometimes two skilled men have different ideas on how to do things. Or maybe George was running low on money and not sure he could finish up the construction. Turns out neither of these was the problem.

"Bulldog, I wonder if we ought to put some more bracing on the north end of that I-beam. It'll be carrying the whole chain-hoist."

Now Bulldog could have said, "Good idea," or, "nah, I don't think we need to," or, "I don't know. I'll go along with you." But he didn't.

"George, you should turn to the Bible. For it is written: 'Now when they saw the boldness of Peter and John and perceived that they were uneducated, common men, they wondered.' Acts 4:13."

"What in tarnation has that got to do with the I-beam?"

"Do not contend with a man for no reason, when he has done you no harm.' Proverbs 3:30. You need more faith, George. You need to read the Word of the Lord. The hour is at

hand. You need to study your Bible."

"What I need is a chain-hoist that won't drop a six hundred pound engine on anyone."

The shop is really coming along pretty well.

"The one thing I am thankful for," George says, "is that Bulldog is too hard a worker to stand around talking long – even about the Bible."

"You sure can't fault him. He does fine work and plenty of it. He's a good Christian too. Makes every effort to practice what he preaches. But Good Lord, does he ever preach!" ●



The Glory Hole

Steve Zabriski has been meeting his new neighbors and exploring. Sam Jaramillo has been telling Steve quite a bit about the mines. There is the famous Fanny, of course, and the Eberle, which is currently back in production. Then there is the Glory Hole.

The Glory Hole is up on the ridge by the road, with a protective fence to keep the unwary from falling in. "And with good reason," Sam explained. "It's fifteen hundred feet deep."

Steve was impressed. He was also curious. "How do you know?" he asked. "You ever been down it?"

"No," Sam replied. "But that's what everyone says."

Steve decided to find out for himself. Steve's father, Stan, had a third of a mile of thick nylon rope in hundred-foot lengths. Steve loaded the whole lot in his pickup and brought it up to the Glory Hole.

Next he collected forty of the stoutest steel pipes he could find and tied them together with baling wire over the top of the hole. Then he tied the ropes end to end, attached the whole mess to the pipes with a huge knot, and began lowering.

Naturally, the weight got to be too much, and the rope got away from him. Steve jumped back. The rope

slid on down the hole and caught with a terrific *Kawhang!* Everything held. Steve grinned in satisfaction and began climbing down with a flashlight tied to his belt.

It was incredibly far. Steve is an athletic boy though, and there were several ledges where he could stop and rest.

Twice he came to places where the rope had settled in a pile. Letting it on down was pretty scary. If it broke when the weight caught, he would be in big trouble. He got away with it though, and the danger made it all the more fun.

At the bottom, there was all sorts of trash people had thrown down over the years. Lots of bones especially. He figured most of them were deer, though he saw one goat skull, complete with horns. There was also a 1953 Oldsmobile.

Steve looked around quite a while. Then he climbed back up. It was one tough climb, but he made it okay.

The only problem was how to get the rope back out of the hole. He tried pulling, but that was futile. He tried dragging it with the pickup. Even that did not work. Finally, he had to go get George Nevil to come up with the winch truck and haul the rope out of the hole. ●

IN SEARCH OF GUY FAWKES

ALLEN ASHLEY

I know he's dead. I watched him hang and then I followed the procession as they took his malodorous corpse to hack apart atop Parliament Hill Fields. Now the rumours and graffiti abound saying, "Guy Fawkes Has Risen". What was it the singer said? "Every generation, another crucifixion." These Republican Revivalists must be quashed.

Of more immediate concern is the scaffolding and green netting recently erected outside my window. The Guild's phone is on the blink and no written explanation is forthcoming. It strikes me as a footpad's paradise. All I can do is double lock my doors and windows, and hope.

The busker at the tube station is murdering Greensleeves, which reminds me I must book tickets for the Vaughan Williams memorial lute recital. Perhaps Rosemary will accompany me if it's a night when she's not performing. I watch her in rehearsal, entranced by the spotlights reflecting off her pale face, her hair as black as the sky beyond Cornwall, the turn of her ankle and the swirl of her skirt as she strides through Act IV. She is pleasant enough towards me but resists my entreaties to take our relationship beyond the bay of friendship. Like the trolley buses in Old Ford Road, our love is one-way traffic only.

Things were fairly sticky for the first twelve to eighteen months following The Change but now all London is united under the wise reign of Good Queen Bess, long may she prosper. Even the Dickensian backwater and my own haunt of solace - Eocene Park - are within her firm grasp. Perhaps there is a modicum of expediency in my decision to throw in my lot with the Crown but, truly, I believe my new life is better than in The Time Before. I have work, shelter, good companionship and had I but Rosemary by my side, my happiness would be complete.

Verily, I am charged also with a mission, as the Chief Purser regularly reminds me when'er I

collect my princely salary. Be it guarding human targets, eradicating enemy scum or merely washing clean the defaced walls around Smithy Street, our function is clear. We must push back the attempted encroachment by The Three Rs - Republicanism, Revivalism, Reductionism. We must preserve the new order against the old chaos.

There was a bomb scare on the Underground again this morning, rendering me late for work. Bad form. If something happened to the strolling players of Grim Up North Theatre Group during my absence ...

When I arrive, the cast are breakfasting on burgers from the local delicatessen. Derek at HQ swears by the Book that they are one hundred per cent canal rat. I would speak but the actor/director, Robert Costessey, is bemoaning London audiences.

"They take those from far shores to their hearts," he says, "but they hate Northerners. And frankly, the feeling is fast becoming mutual."

He fails to notice me for a few moments; when he does, his embarrassment is palpable.

Usually so silent, my unattained love Rosemary Catesby doth speak up and contend, "Have faith, Robert. *The Last Of The Bard* shall yet triumph. Why, I didst read in *The Times* only yesterday that the great poet has no plans to come out of retirement ... We are at least breaking even."

"And thou dost have the personal backing of our Good Queen Elizabeth, blessed be her name," I interject.

I sense one or two members of the cast are on the verge of speaking something treasonable but Costessey shushes them.

"Lo, 'tis our personal muscle man," he exclaims.

"Not so, sir. I am employed for my quality of discretion and powers of observation," I reply.

"Well observe this then, southern knave!" he states, fists clenched around a bundle of manuscript.

"Robert!" Rosemary shouts, fearful I may respond to his insult. I shall not knowingly sully my steel blade with his hypocritical blood. Ah yes, verily have I seen him chalking off his cockney girl conquests! It is information I shall retain for later.

The sheaf of papers he gives me is the usual flurry of veiled and open threats of poisoned chalices and microbe bombs. I promise to investigate thoroughly. More donkey work unless I can delegate ... The mummers away to their make-up. Except Rosemary.

"Jackson," she says softly, her ringless left hand stroking the stubble on my cheek, "be not too hard on Robert. He's under a lot of pressure at the moment."

I brush my lips over her gentle fingers and look down into her blue eyes. Oh the empty cardiograph of my beat-skipping heart! My love, shall I compare thee to the moon in Spring?

"I'll do whatever you wish," I promise.

I am called in to see my Supervisor. He counsels me to be extra vigilant and utters some cryptic remark about how this Winter may be the last as we currently construe society. A warning or a threat? I am puzzled. Is there to be a shake-up among the servants of the Crown or have the Reductionist scientists advanced their knowledge so far?

I need time to think. I carry a newspaper and a substantial takeaway lunch to Eocene Park. During this chilly season the visitors are few and the animals standoffish, which is how I prefer them. When the Reality Shift occurred we lost the cream-painted splendour of Regent's Park inner circle as well as the run-down iron railings of the unfashionable zoo. We gained a magical domain of flightless birds and ungulates all now under the patronage of Our Virgin Queen, long may she reign.

In his weekly newspaper column, Christopher Wren decries the carbunculum of modern London's architecture. I feel sure he would relish the unhurried slopes and the open spaces of

Eocene Park. Alas, he is probably too busy with royal patronage and witty features for *The Guardian* to venture beyond SW1 and EC4.

A sleet shower bids me take shelter amid the trees. Since The Change the Winter months have been markedly colder and we have experienced a succession of White Christmasses. There were frost patterns on my window this morning despite the scaffolding and we are assured of an inclement Good Fire Night, when we celebrate Our Lady Queen's accession, may she prosper.

At the park exit I notice a white calling card carelessly discarded on the grass. It is embossed in imitation gold leaf and bears a triangular design somewhere between a wigwam and a bonfire; this is topped by a stoke hat. Underneath the motif are the words: "Guido Is Risen".

The *Morning Glory*, most strident of the tabloids, carries a front page adorned with the headline, "Shakespearean Star In Sex Shocker!" The scurrilous tale concerns some minor member of the Court of Milan at the National, not the man himself. With this sort of coverage, however, it is surely no wonder that the immortal bard keeps his quill embedded in the inkwell these days. I wonder how the piece will affect GUN Theatre's ratings.

Page seven is taken up with an article concerning apparent sightings of the late revolutionary Guy Fawkes. Something is certainly afoot. An impersonator? A smoke screen for a microbe bombing campaign? I go through the article with a visual fine-toothed comb, once for information and once for disloyalty to the Crown. The writer has been careful to fill his cheek with his tongue and mere froth.

There are many longueurs during the acting day. Rosemary enters the canteen.

"What are you reading?" she asks.

"A story about your compatriot, Guido Fawkes."

Her beautiful face expresses genuine surprise.



"Methought he was deceased."

"He is. I saw him die. There are those who would turn him into a Christ-figure."

Now her whole body expresses shock. "You saw him die, Jackson?"

I realize I have committed a *faux pas* which will lower me in her esteem. I seek redemption in the eyes of my angel.

"It was my duty to attend his execution," I mumble. "Work and all that."

She nods, composed on the instant. "That papist and insurrectionist," she says. "I count him no countryman of mine."

She sits down opposite, hands encircling a mug of decaffeinated coffee. I feel I could be ten years out either way in my estimate of her youth or age. It matters not except that if stripling girl she be, she will have fewer memories of The Time Before.

I am in philosophical vein. "We have been blessed," I assure her, "with the best of all worlds. Why, only last month I went to hear Mr Chaucer speak at the Festival Hall."

She raises her eyebrows. She reaches across and begins stroking the short blond hairs on my forearm where my shirt cuff has ridden up. She says, "Each time they shuffle the pack a different card comes out on top. Maybe this time it's Jack's turn!" She smiles.

"Why not?" I answer. "I have good money, steady work and an ID card that will keep me out of the clutches of the press gang and the peelers. There is but one lack."

She raises her hand and places her finger over my lips. "Speak it not," she instructs. I bow to her wish. She adds, "Were I but to find a suitable troupe in this great metropolis, yea, verily wouldst I consider tarrying here a great while ..."

It is the cue I have awaited so long. There are ... avenues open to me. I rise. She stands with me. Our lips unite, but oh so briefly.

My Supervisor calls me urgently back to HQ. There is expectation of increased RRR activity prior to Christmas. A winter of discontent, to be sure. We are shown video footage from a secret hand-held camera smuggled into one of the enemy's meetings. The leader certainly passes as the very likeness of the supposedly dead Guido Fawkes. There is also a segment detailing the construction of the microbe bombs which have brought such disruption to the post-Change London. Some of the technology which has survived the Reality Shift is regrettably sophisticated. There is enough of the mutant virus packed into the toilet roll-sized cylinder to wipe out a whole neighbourhood.

"We've been tipped off there's a cache hidden in the slums and warehouses of Queen's Cross," the boss informs us. "You'll have Gold Warrant cards and the full backup of the local peelers. Find out what you can. Don't hold back - we mustn't let these anti-royalist bastards triumph."

I am assigned to work with Derek Wells, a regular frequenter of the area he calls "Saint Pancreas". A busy terminus and intersection in The Time Before, the place is as much a-buzz as ever. The trams and trolley buses disgorge their passengers; the brothels, video arcades and low cabarets happily consume them. The shops are full of tacky souvenirs and the rockets and roman candles with which we shall shortly celebrate the crowning of Queen Elizabeth, blessed of God.

Derek drinks freely from a hip flask full of mother's ruin. "What worries me," he mutters, "is the possibility that the Three Rs are feeding us false information. You know, we're here ... and they're there." I concur. He adds, "Still, while we're here, Jack, we ought to take advantage of the ... er, local facilities."

He approaches a prostitute on the corner of Caledonian Road. Make-up and gaslight have redeemed ten years of her existence. They haggle



over prices for a minute until I guide my colleague away towards more pressing matters. In a quiet moment I report back to base on my walkie-talkie. The likelihood of nocturnal action is diminishing but our patrol must continue. My mind is full of the faces and figures from the chief's video. At times I feel crushed by the enormity of our task. How can we ever hope to do more than simply stem the backsliding tide?

My thoughts are also on Rosemary. In our current vicinity there is a whorehouse on every corner. In this city of wantons, it is my typicality to have fallen for a maiden chaste and true.

Increasingly sozzled, Derek seeks female companionship anew. His earlier encounter now has a bosom buddy. Our night shift is near its end. The women want ten guineas apiece for a fifteen minute session on a mildewed mattress. In the end, I agree to pay fifty florins for a quick knee trembler down a back alley. My paramour could be my assailant – she is so rough with her rubbing and caresses. Afterwards, the earthworm of guilt eats me whole. I do not feel I can look lovingly at my Rosemary again.

London experiences a tidal wave of violence. I am caught up in much of the troubles. A microbe bomb is unleashed in a street parallel to my own. Our goodly Crown Servants – peelers, paramedics and bomb squad officers – are soon on the scene. A large area of tenements is cordoned off and fumigated. The newspapers report the event with a surprising lack of sensationalism and suggest casualties are only light. By my own conservative estimation of one resident per flat *minimum*, there must have been at least twenty deaths. The following night I climb atop the scaffolding which still encases my window and watch furtively as several corpses are loaded into hermetically sealed caissons by orderlies in black protective clothing.

I am witness also to an altercation one late Saturday outside the Royal Albert Hall where every night is the Last Night Of The Proms. A

large assemblage of punks, drop-outs, urban indians and the like lay in wait for the bejewelled and besuited glitterati. A ruck ensues with knives, fists and studded belts being repelled by acidic hair spray and sharpened silver CDs. My attire and presence of mind keeps me as a watching non-combatant in this furious fashion war. I seek the hand of Fawkes and his followers in this vicious ambush but find no tangible evidence. It seems our society is fragmenting just as our historical reality was disarranged by meddling scientists some seven years ago. Only faith in our Queen can keep us together.

I find many more of the "Guido Is Risen" embossed cards in the gutters and doorways of our troubled metropolis. Corresponding graffiti appears in the subways around Euston but our goodly liveried janitors are quick to the task of removing the offensive handiwork.

High on adrenalin, I have difficulty sleeping. When I do achieve slumber my dreams are haunted by the nemesis who threatens our hard-won way of life: Guy Fawkes, evil reincarnate. My nocturnal visions at times carry over into the waking world and I begin seeing the stoke-hatted, bearded figure on street corners or in trolley bus queues. At times I give chase but he is always brilliantly elusive ... or totally imaginary.

The pitched battle of Albert Hall is not covered by any of the papers or the networks. I can only assume that Good Queen Bess, long may she prosper, feels that bad news can only further inflame the fires of rebellion. I confide in a colleague whose discretion I expect.

"Sounds like a bit of a rumble," Derek agrees. "Still, I've always thought *Land Of Hope And Glory* and *Anarchy In The UK* were just two sides of the same coin."

I worry that alcoholic consumption has warped his judgement that he should utter such seditious thoughts. I vow to keep "difficult" information to myself in future unless specifically requested to do otherwise.

Rumours abound that if the social situation



worsens, our sovereign may cancel the grand fireworks festival to mark the anniversary of her glorious accession, or Bonny Fire Night as popular culture calls it. Perhaps she will address the nation and appeal for renewed calm and order.

My heart is lightened when my Supervisor calls me into his office.

"Agent Livingstone," he informs me, "I am returning you to your previous position as special bodyguard with GUN Theatre."

Rosemary! I breathe, but I say, "Thank you, sire. Mayest I enquire thy reasoning?"

"You may, Jackson. Our good Queen, blessed be she, remains intent on securing and expanding her realm. If we can safeguard and be seen to value those from a culture beyond our boundaries, it can only go well for her benevolent reign. Protect and survive, eh, Livingstone?"

Irise early, up with the cries of the dull brown sparrows, although I like to believe they are the mating calls of the diatryma or some other such exotic denizen of Eocene Park. Trials and tribulations are part of the human condition. Enemy scientists are at work at this very moment trying to restore the bi-millennialist hell we so fortuitously escaped. I prefer the London we have reclaimed from the Reality Rift and have grown to cherish.

The man with the hard hat outside my door I take to be the site foreman. At last an explanation.

"Are you scientifically qualified, Master?" he enquires. I offer him a brief glimpse of my Crown employment warranty, along with a tongue-loosening gold sovereign. "Ah, a renaissance man," he continues. "Thou may know then, sire, that the fabric of reality is being continuously undermined. Physical structures bear much of the strain. Yea, verily, even the honourable Queen's Palace is in need of attention."

I thank him and add, "Methinks, however, that this scaffolding doth remind me too much of a gallows."

His face is bright coinage. "Hast thou not heard, then, sire?" He produces a tabloid newspaper from his tool box. "Our goodly peelers have arrested the scoundrels who planted yon device but lately. Perchance, we may witness a hanging before Christmas."

Oh happiness! The early morning frost is but icing for the rich metropolitan plum pudding. The berries on the mistletoe are the shade of my true love's skin.

She is alone with me.

I have hired a horse-drawn carriage which will discreetly trot around the perimeter of Hyde Park under the care of its cockney driver, thanks for the dosh, guvnor, no questions asked. For the moment Rosemary and I admire the view. Later we may pull down the black shutters.

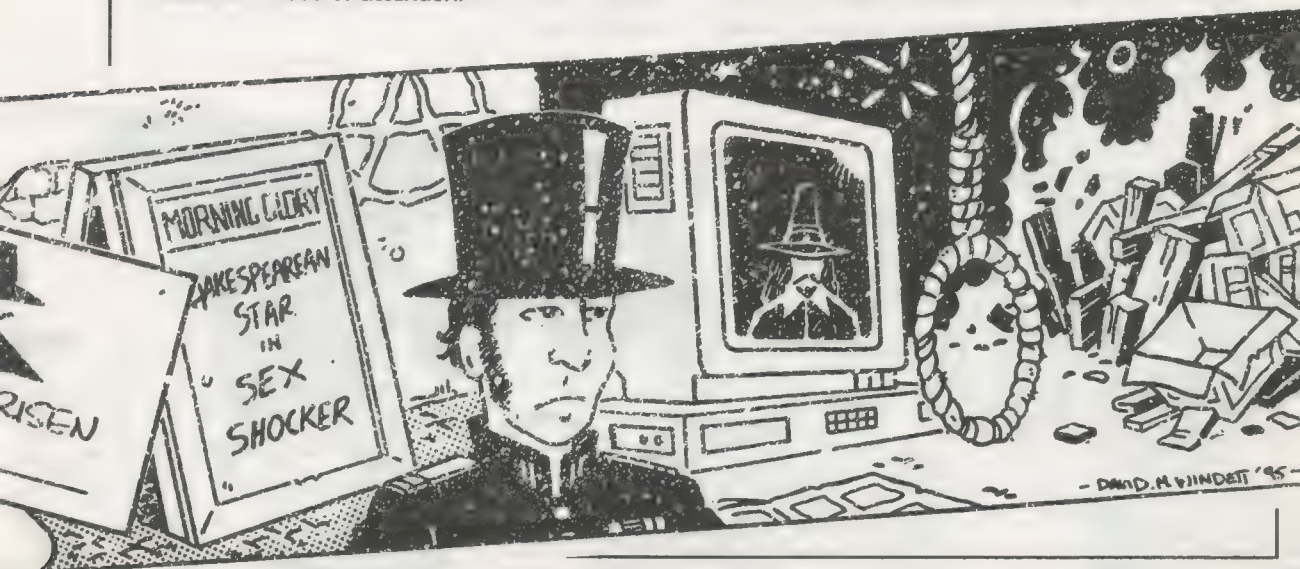
"I am unspoken for," she whispers.

I smile. "I did wonder," I answer, "whether you were betrothed to any of the company."

"Am I not wearing white?" she counters.

And certainly she is, a dress of unseasonal thinness and immodesty with a hemline above her cream-stockinged knees and a decorative motif of climbing roses beneath which her small breasts rise and fall in breathy anticipation. It is a costume fit for Ophelia.

We talk awhile. She tells me how things differ in Lancastria and how many, she not among them but relaying their argument, would like to see our united queendom split up into its various principalities. Our hands knit, fingers explore skin and hair. I try to inspire her as to the delights of the metropolis as well as suggesting my own importance in the current scheme of things. I foresee our lives intertwining in a golden shared



future, just as our legs, arms and lips join, part and explore in order to join again. Mayhap the wheelchair-bound bard will write no more but there will be other plays, other stages ... and a home to make together.

She is all I hoped for in a woman. My redolent Rosemary whose gentle head rests now on my bare shoulder, our love scarce five minutes consummated.

Suddenly there is a commotion as the conveyance grinds to a jarring halt amidst equine neighing and raised male voices. I am half-dressed, seeking the weapon concealed in my doublet and hose as the door is jerked open and Robert Costessey stares in.

"So, here be-est thou, odious whore!" he bellows.

I aim a futile kick at his angry features.

"Be thou my brother, be not my keeper!" Rosemary yells back, one hand frantically rearranging her dishevelled bodice and petticoats.

I am out of the carriage now, right hand bedaggered, left arm struggling to don the wayward sleeve of my formal coat. The actor is several steps away, irate head partially turned away.

"This is not what we agreed," he calls over his shoulder. "Fie, strumpet, to suck the cocks of Southerners!"

I chase the blackguard but sex has temporarily robbed me of true sprinting speed. I lose him some sixty yards from Speaker's Corner.

Though I trudge slowly back, my mind is in the grip of a whirlwind. Thoughts and suppositions chase each other like weevils in a granary.

I return to find the rest of my clothes and belongings - yea, even my purse - neatly piled beneath an alder sapling. Of the horse and cart and my erstwhile lover, there is no sign.

In a daze I stumble towards HQ, brimful of a confused tale of conspiracies, turncoat cultural ambassadors and an overriding need for considerable assistance. My Supervisor is at a

meeting of the Privy Council. Derek is at his desk, however, sorting through his personal effects.

"Jack," he beckons, "have you heard the latest?"

I want to say actually, old man, I've experienced the latest, but I walk across to him. His breath reeks of gin. I wonder whether it's Derek or the drink talking.

"Between you and me," he whispers, "plans are afoot to restore the old order."

He nods at my gasp of shock.

"But that's Reductionist," I argue.

"Change of policy. Seems the cross-legged Queen and the high-ups reckon they can survive the transition and retain their hold on Greater Reality. The new philosophy is 'Restorationism'."

My mind which had been in turmoil is now like the primeval soup at the very beginning of time. Electrons scatter and collide with no home base to cling to.

"Bit of a blow, what?" Derek suggests, squeezing my shoulder. "Who knows if we'll make it to Yuletide. If I were you, I'd get my hands on a keg of ale and a couple of young trollops while there's still time."

I am late for the performance. Audiences for "Grim Up North Presents: *The Last Of The Bard*" are almost up to capacity, bolstered by extensive media coverage and best seat competitions in *The Morning Glory*. I stand at the back awhile and watch my one-time charges go through their paces. Sonnets are recited with lyrical precision; vignettes are enacted with unhurried conviction. I admire Rosemary's talent. She has the potential to become the finest actress of her generation, an amalgam of Desdemona and Lady Macbeth. The mummer who really catches the eye, however, is Robert Costessey - or should I say, *Catesby*? A loss indeed will this gentleman be to the great dramatic art!



I have been poring over the records of Fawkes's trial. In several of the courtroom shots of the false messiah I have espied Robert the thespian's hateful visage amid the public gallery. Some of Guido's suspected fellow conspirators have never been captured ... until now.

Immediately after the interval I make my way to the dressing room. My gloved hands are equally adept at plucking the lute, offering lover's caresses and rummaging through a blue and white grip bag for incriminating evidence. I am soon rewarded with the latter.

My viperish eyes scan the poorly typed pages of agitprop which in GUN Theatre's next production would attempt to absolve their verminous traitor of a cousin of all blame for his crimes against Queen and country. I pocket the bundle of foolscap for subsequent quiet disposal.

More useful is the stack of white cards, gold-embossed with the legend, "Guy Fawkes Is Risen". Doubtless the troupers will claim these are purely for publicity. That will be for the hanging judge to decide.

I feel nothing but contempt for Robert Catesby, my personal nemesis. I feel some sympathy for Rosemary but duty is duty. All the world's a stage, my darling, and I have played my part.

It is Good or Bonny Fire Night. To all outward intents I am like any other happy reveller indulging in this peculiarly English celebration. I attend to the quaffing of ale and avaricious consumption of slices from the hog roast, laugh uproariously at the jibes of my companions, gape and gawp at the phosphorescent flowers erupting against the black dome of the night sky. London is a miasma of exploding cardboard tubes, gunpowder clouds and rousing Royalist anthems.

Inside, I am sorely troubled. I have handed over my dream woman to the unsubtle clutches

of the warders at Newgate prison. So what if she didst not truly love me? There would have come a time ...

A little after midnight, I absent myself from the neighbourhood carousers and begin an aimless wander through the busy streets. I am half-taken with the notion of consigning my worthless body into the depths of Old Father Thames. I lose track of the hours ...

I find myself at the entrance to HQ at about eight o'clock in the morning. Unrested, but nourished by last night's repast and the new dawn's adrenalin, I am resolved to confront my boss with the full weight of my wrathful existential crisis. My clothes feel rough and sweaty. The stubble on my neck and chin is itchy and irritating.

My Supervisor is already at his post. His head is in his hands and he seems to be sobbing. His bald cranium presents an acceptable target for a broadsword or a meat cleaver.

He looks up.

His face is covered in a veritable pox of red weals and pus-emitting spots. I am rendered momentarily speechless, immobile.

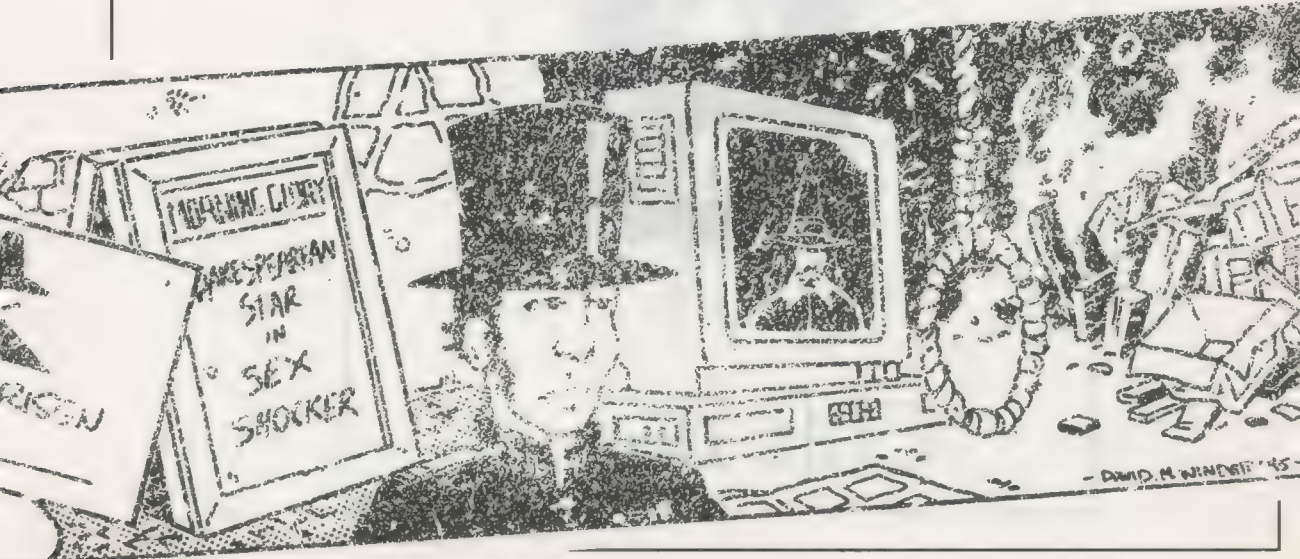
"Did you watch the displays last night, Jackson?" he asks croakily.

"Of course," I mutter as my hands rise to explore the volcanic eruptions on my own face.

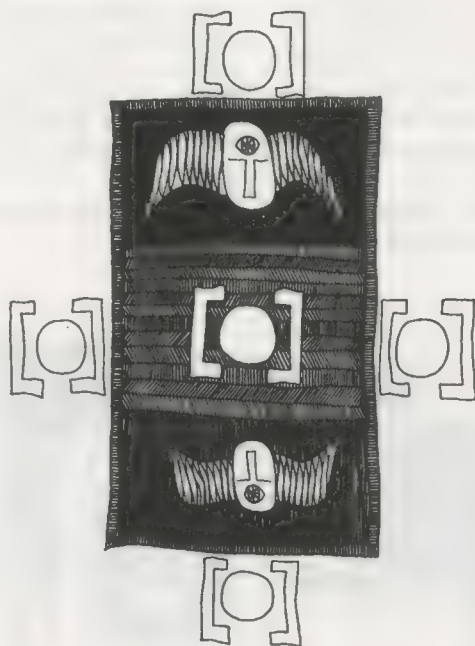
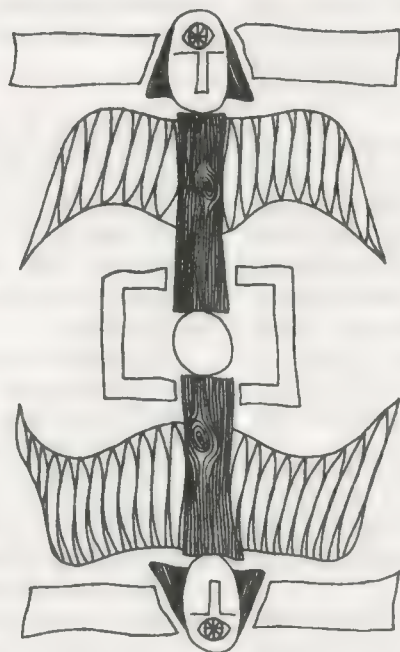
He shakes his head. "It's too late for us, now, lad," he mumbles. "Really we should've known, of course, that Good Fire Night was just the cover those bastards needed to launch a full-scale attack with their microbe bombs."

My hands fall. He is right. It's too late for us now.

Guy Fawkes has risen. □



CRANES



Cliff Burns

Sometime in the next century random chance and the vicissitudes of synchronicity dictate that two people for the sake of argument let's say that they are **TWO MEN** will meet in the street around dusk for that is when there is less of a risk from **ULTRAVIOLET RADIATION** and they will have decided rashly one supposes that now would be a good time for a stroll this taking place just before the **CURFEW** takes effect so while they needn't be concerned with **POLICE** at the same time they must keep an eye out for **STREET GANGS/VICIOUS PUNKS** and **MINORITY EXTREMISTS** but after all this is a pretty good neighbourhood not too many **UNDESIRABLES** have taken up residence in the empty houses where good people **USED** to live back when **LIVING WITHIN YOUR MEANS** wasn't the punch line to a bad joke and these two **GENTLEMEN** both of median age and social caste forsaking their cocooned existences for just a few minutes **THE BARE MINIMUM** come around the corner at the **EXACT** same time so they nearly bump heads back-pedal from each other hands raised an unconscious defense mechanism even though their muscles have **ATROPHIED** because after all they only punch keyboards recall data collate formulate synthesize these two **GENTLEMEN** dressed in comfortable leisure suits concealing little paunches and postures only a kangaroo could love open their mouths to utter apologetic **INANITIES** only instead of words their unpracticed vocal cords produce only **SQUAWKS** the two of them flapping their arms and **SQUAWKING** at each other like a couple of **EXTINCT** cranes circling in a ritualistic mating dance eyes bulging impotent throats working turning from each other fleeing back to their **COMFORTABLE** homes on **IDENTICAL** streets while the ancient moon rises begins its precipitous ascent through a sky clogged with **CHEMICALS** the night the city the global village peopled by functional **IDIOTS** and still half the world **STARVES**. □

mike o'driscoll

the ones we need, the ones we leave behind

bennie Brown stood waiting by the tube exit, one hand in his pocket, the other squeezing a microdot against his scrawny neck. The evening was warm and sultry, but his flesh was ice beneath his clothes. The subdued rush didn't so much hit him as creep up on his brain, pissing him off. Bennie didn't know who he was waiting for. He didn't know much anymore, except the strange compulsions that drove him to do things he didn't understand. When his mind was lucid, which was no longer that often, he convinced himself he was hallucinating, a victim of some weird new illness, a haunting.

The doors slid open and belched out steam from which a steady flow of commuters emerged, headgear and shades insulating their anonymity. Bennie's eyes fixed on one of their number, a tall, well-dressed woman with blonde hair piled on her head on which was perched a white beret. Her eyes were hidden behind sleek Raybans and she carried a leather briefcase under one arm. The ghost inside Bennie prompted him to follow her. He had no idea who she was nor why he was following her; his

body simply moved without his command, giving him a disquieting taste of insanity.

Inside Bennie Brown's head, Tukalo's sense of excitement was growing. Bennie's drugs no longer affected him: he chose to bypass the high. Physiologically he could still get off, it was simply that he no longer wanted to – he'd had enough of forgetting, it was time to remember. He'd never been a woman before, but he was convinced this was the way to make things right. The way the woman's body moved aroused him, made him feel instinctively that he'd made the right choice. He followed at a distance of fifty metres as she turned off Main Street, moving smoothly through performing dudes and buskers dead on their feet. He closed on her, slowly, without threat.

"Excuse me," he called from a few steps behind her. "Do you know the Blue Kink?"

The woman spun round. "What?" she said.

Tukalo made Bennie smile. "A bar, I think it's round here."

She searched for support from a group of leather-clad boys passing by. They looked her up

and down, Bennie too, and moved on. Tukalo sensed her fear – it was the thing they all shared, the stupid, irrational fear of the unknown; it was this quest to explore the unknown that gave him the strength to go on without Apollonia. “No,” the woman said. “I don’t know it.”

“You all right?” Tukalo said, and stretched out Bennie Brown’s arm to her arm. And slid into her mind. She shuddered, but otherwise was unaware of his invasion. He watched through her eyes as Bennie Brown crumpled to the ground, blank eyes staring at her, soundless babble spilling from his mouth. Tukalo drew a veil over her surprise, stifled her momentary confusion, and allowed her to take him home.

She lived in a new block, top floor, expensive, tasteful. As she made coffee and sat down to unwind, Tukalo began to assimilate the details of her life. Her name was Cath Beckett, she was twenty-seven years old and worked as a copywriter for an advertising agency. She lived here alone, and had a steady, if somewhat staid, boyfriend named Jack, whom she was supposed to see tonight. Digging it, Tukalo detected her irritation at this last revelation. Tough shit Jack. Cathy needs something, or someone, more than you can be.

A filament of thought stroked her mind. She went through to the bedroom. Another persuasive caress, and Cath Beckett was slowly undressing and pulling the pins from her hair, letting the blonde curls tumble down over her shoulders. Tukalo gazed through her green eyes at the image in the wall mirror. At his prompting, she ran her hands over her flesh, surprising herself with the salacious thoughts that rippled her mind. She felt her breasts and squeezed the nipples, delighting at the way they hardened; she ran two fingers between her legs, stroking the labia as if this was something new. Then Tukalo had her stop – time for play later. First he must ready her for Apollonia. He was certain his former lover was in the body of a man. Tonight, with this creature,

this Cath Beckett, he would win her back.

He flexed his grip on her, testing the extent of his control. As yet, Cath was unaware of his presence inside her. She followed his hints and suggestions as if they were her own. Satisfied, he had her pull on a silk suspender belt and stockings which she found in the dressing table. Their touch excited him. She pulled them on slowly, so he could savour the moment. Next, panties and a bra and over these she wore a short, red leather skirt, a sleeveless cotton blouse and a jacket to match the skirt. He felt these were a little more conducive to what he had in mind than her previous attire. These were the things that would attract him and that, he hoped, would attract Apollonia. She applied make-up to her face and studied herself in the mirror, ignorant of the fact that she was now, partly, Tukalo’s creation.

She caught a cab from near the tube and gave the name of the Hampstead restaurant as if it were a place she had dined many times before. In the back of the cab, Tukalo slowly replaced her will with his own, tucking Cath Beckett’s awareness deep down into the redundant recesses of her brain.

He’d guessed correctly. A skating waiter showed him to where Apollonia sat in a quiet alcove towards the rear of the restaurant, away from the suited types who spoke in public whispers. She was a dark-haired, pale-skinned man, with grey eyes that scrutinised him with a lively intelligence. Despite her new appearance, a familiar aura shone subtly about her. “Tukalo,” Apollonia said, rising to greet him.

Tukalo directed a finger to Cath’s lips and shook her head, making a ssshshshhing sound. “It’s Cath,” he said. “Cath Beckett.”

“Christ,” the man, Apollonia, said as he took her hand and kissed it. “You look so ... so ...” he slumped in his seat, evidently lost for words. Tukalo was thrilled.

“Beautiful?” he suggested.

"A woman," Apollonia said. "I never expected."

"I wanted to surprise you. After all, this is a special occasion, the tenth anniversary of our escape."

It was Apollonia's turn to shake her head. "It's Michael," she said. "Michael Valentine Smith."

"Valentine?" Tukalo said.

"It's a long story."

The restaurant buzzed with the thrill of hikers out after dark in a lo-life zone, a tangible fear that was almost sexual. Tukalo thrived on it. They ordered drinks and commenced the familiar pattern of small talk that determined their status as ex-lovers. Their paths crossed intermittently on the wandering, and they met once a year at this restaurant to catch up on what was new and what had passed. Ten years ago, Tukalo recalled, they'd been two no-hopers who'd signed contracts allowing researchers to use experimental surgery in an effort to rid them of brain tumours. A miracle cure, but at a price. Two years of their lives to be spent in a government-funded institute investigating the development and harnessing of psychic powers.

Patric Tukalo he was back then, and she was Apollonia DeVries, two inhibited and frightened people condemned to die until tests revealed that, even before they were offered the radical surgery, they shared a remarkable empathic bond. After their operations, researchers were convinced that, with the right stimuli, they could convert this bond into a full-blown telepathic link. Progress had been made, but the scientists had alienated them with their cold, almost brutal attitudes. They accepted that they were guinea pigs, but resented being stripped of their dignity and kept in ignorance of the ultimate purpose of the experiments. Donald Collins was the Chief Scientist on the project, Amanda Kidder his assistant. These two it was, whom they identified as being responsible for their torment. Tukalo and Apollonia became closer as the experiments intensified. They'd felt violated

but had been unable to remove themselves from the programme. They were bound by the contracts they'd signed.

By the time they finished the main meal, Tukalo was convinced she was holding something back. He probed her with subtle questions but was unable to discover the cause of her reticence. He sensed that the man she was, was attracted to the body he inhabited, but that she was fighting it. He wondered why.

"How long do you plan to be her?" Apollonia asked him.

"Why?"

"It would be a shame to damage her. I sense her inside there, something of this Cath Beckett coming through. Do you feel it?"

"What do you mean?" Tukalo said, fighting a ripple of anger. The truth was, he'd let ribbons of Cath's charm reach out to ensnare Apollonia, but it hadn't worked as he'd intended. His one-time lover felt sympathy for this woman, not love.

"You still take their minds?" Apollonia said.

"I wipe the slate clean. Leave no clues for the inquisitive."

"Of course," Apollonia said, her eyes turned from his. "But have you considered other possibilities?"

"What other possibilities," Tukalo said. Then, "You're hiding something from me."

"Don't be stupid."

"You're thinking of giving up the wandering?" He didn't know where that thought had come from, but now he had given it voice, it seemed to attain a power and reality of its own.

Apollonia sighed heavily. "Look Tukalo, things have changed in the last three years. I don't have the same needs anymore. Besides, it's nearly ten years since we got out of the institute. They don't know what happened to us."

Tukalo remembered when they'd made the

breakthrough that was so much more than the forging of a telepathic link. They'd each entered the others' body, completely abandoning their true physical forms. Tukalo was Apollonia, and she was him. They hid this new discovery from the scientists and began to formulate the plot that got them out of the institute. They developed and honed their skills, sending part of themselves eddying out into the void, then retreating, learning that they needed to physically touch someone to penetrate a mind without the host being aware of the invading presence. Then they were ready to make the final jump. Meeting with Collins and Kidder, they'd touched them and entered their minds. In those bodies, they'd simply walked out the doors, jumped in a car and drove out past the guards, abandoning forever their original flesh. "What about Collins and Kidder?" he said.

"They couldn't tell them anything except what we planted in their minds. They would have blamed themselves for killing us."

"So what are you saying?"

"This woman, why waste her? Why not let her be?"

"I became her for you, damn it," Tukalo said, unable to contain his feelings.

"What? What are you saying?" Shock permeated the languid features of Michael Valentine Smith.

"I love you," Tukalo explained. "I want you back."

"It can't be, Tukalo, I'm sorry."

For the first time, Tukalo began to doubt his plan. "Can't be? Tell me why."

"I can't go on hurting them, don't you understand?"

"No, I fucking don't," Tukalo screamed, his rage supping on fear.

Their waiter rolled up to the table on his skates. "Would the lady mind keeping her voice down," he said to Tukalo.

"Get lost," Tukalo said.

"Madam, I'm afraid I have —"

"I thought," Tukalo began, staring into the waiter's eyes, "I told you to fuck off." He gripped the waiter's hand and sent part of his being inside the other's mind, opened it a crack to reveal one brief glimpse of how totally his being could be distorted. It was enough. The waiter rolled back from the table, his eyes filled with the blank terror of total comprehension.

"Christ, Tukalo," Apollonia said, rising to leave. "Did you have to do that?"

He followed her outside, clutched Smith's arm and said, "I need you. Who else can share this?"

"It's not you, not this woman you've made yourself," Apollonia said. She gestured at the body she was in. "This man was empty, a shell. I found him in hospital. I searched for someone like him."

"Why?"

"All the others were just second-hand. The longer we stayed in them, the more damage we did. Fucking their heads, turning them into mindless wrecks. That wasn't what we set out to do."

"It's the way of the wandering, we can't leave evidence."

"Tukalo, I made this man Smith. He'd been in an accident, was pronounced brain dead. I took him over and made him into this person. I've been him for nearly a year."

"And now," Tukalo said unable to disguise his bitterness, "you plan to stay inside him. What about me?"

"There's more," she said. She turned away from him, wiped sweat from Smith's pale forehead. "I've met someone. A woman."

"You could have me, now, right now," Tukalo said. "I became a woman for you. You were bored with me before, that's why you —"

"I wasn't bored, Tukalo. I never loved you. You know that. The sex was part of the experience,

seeing how far we could push the bodies. We needed each other then, now we don't. I want my life to have meaning again, something it hasn't had since we discovered what we're capable of. We were never gods, Tukalo."

"Stay with me, I'll make it like it was," Tukalo pleaded. "I can't do this alone."

"I'm sorry. There's no going back. You'll forget me in time."

And Tukalo watched through female eyes as the pale man that held the one he wanted, got into a cab and abandoned him. He had never felt so alone in all his lives.

Cath Beckett went hunting, though she was only partly involved in the process. A two-hour sweep through the sex bars of Camden reaped a dude named Joe. Maybe he had another name, something to distinguish him from all the other Joes, Tukalo didn't care. By one a.m. Cath's mind was wrapped in the shroud of his anger and lust. He took Joe back to her block and played games with them both. Joe was willing, that's why he'd been chosen. He tied Cath up and beat her, just so Tukalo could experience the pain from a woman's point of view. He enjoyed it so much, he decided to let her share the feeling. He opened a window on her mind, allowing Cath to glimpse the degradation he was subjecting her to. Her screams heightened his pleasure.

Later, the intercom buzzed in the hall. Joe was for ignoring it, but Tukalo was curious. A wisp of persuasion tickled Joe's mind and he untied her arms and legs. She went to the hall and spoke Tukalo's words into the intercom. "Who is it?"

"Who is it? Jesus Christ, Cath. Where've you been? It's Jack."

The boyfriend. "Sorry Jack," Tukalo said. "Come on up and I'll explain." She pressed the lock release button then returned to the bedroom where dude Joe was waiting.

"Lie down," she told him. He did so and she straddled him. He thrust himself up inside her, while Tukalo had Cath's fists strike him across the face. Joe hit back, bloodying her lips. They laughed, wildly. Then a voice called out from the hallway.

"Cath," Jack said. "Where are you?"

Joe tensed beneath her. "Who's that?"

"My boyfriend," she said, and then louder, "in here, Jack."

He stopped, framed in the doorway, a look of shock, then rage, transforming his features. "Cath?" Jack croaked.

"Jack," Cath said, "this is my friend, Joe. Joe, meet Jack." And then Tukalo opened another window for her, so she could share with him the experience of what they did to each other for her sake.

It took five days to find her. He trailed Michael Valentine Smith from a distance, working on his plan. If he could subvert the woman, he'd convince Apollonia of the futility of turning her back on what she had become. Late on the fifth day, he saw Smith enter an old block in Brixton. Thirty minutes later he came out with a woman at his side. From the way they held each other and kissed and laughed, Tukalo knew she was the one. He checked out her name which was Deborah Fell and she shared a third-floor apartment with a girl called Dee Funicelli.

He waited, figuring Cath Beckett was still good for another day or two. He'd used her to dump Jack and Joe in a roadside skip; they'd been found and taken to hospital suffering from multiple injuries as well as shock and possible amnesia. He'd had to do a total erase on Cath – the horror of what she'd seen had unhinged her mind. Now, having found Apollonia's new love, it was imperative he enter her mind and become her so that he could expose her weaknesses to Apollonia.

Two days after he found her, he watched

Deborita Fell exit a tram near Railton Road. He stalked her, ten paces behind. She was small, fragile and her short, blonde hair shone in the evening light. Tukalo tried, but couldn't see the thing in her that attracted Apollonia. At one point, a black dude flopped his tackle in Tukalo's path and said it was going for twenty. Tukalo grabbed the dude's cock and squeezed hard, and sent connective nightmare fibres into his brain, enough to plague the dude's sleep for a month. Five minutes later, he saw Deborita enter her block. He waited ten minutes before buzzing her.

"Yeah?" A woman's voice came out of the intercom.

"Deborita there?" Tukalo said.

"Who wants her?"

"Friend of Smith's."

Silence for a minute, then the lock clicked and Tukalo pushed the door open. He made his way upstairs. On the second floor landing he met a woman coming down. "I'm Dee," she said. "We spoke. Deborita just got in. She's changing."

"Oh, hi," Tukalo said, smiling. Dee Funicelli wore jeans and a leather jacket and seemed to be in a hurry to get somewhere. She brushed strands of long, black hair from her face, a gesture Tukalo supposed she thought made her sexy. Under different circumstances, he could've made good use of her.

"It's the next floor up," Dee said. "End of the hall. Door's on the latch. I'm off out for the night, ta ta."

"Thanks, so long," Tukalo said and went on up the last flight.

"Deborita?" he called out from the doorway.

"Come on in," she answered from somewhere inside. "Be there in a sec."

Tukalo wandered through the apartment, ending up in the kitchen. There was a small framed photograph of Michael Valentine Smith on the windowsill. He picked it up and tried to see Apollonia in that face.

"Hi," came a voice behind him. "He's put on a bit of weight since that was taken. Needed to. I'm Deborita. What can I do for you?"

"I used to know him," Tukalo said.

"Know him?"

"Yeah, before his accident."

"Accident?" Confusion smeared her face. "He never said anything about —"

"Doesn't matter," Tukalo said. "He's obviously over it now."

"Wait a sec, tell me about it. I mean, you said, how well did you know him, exactly?" Tukalo saw the effort it took Deborita to compose herself. Seemed there were things Apollonia had seen fit not to tell her. Inwardly, he smiled at her distress.

"It was all a long time ago," Tukalo said, shaking Cath Beckett's head, regretfully. "There's no need to worry about —"

"Please, just tell me what you came to say. I want to know."

"Oh well," Tukalo smiled, "whatever you say." He caught her suddenly, in Cathy's urgent grip, and made the leap. And was repulsed. Deborita screamed as he tried repeatedly to wrest control of her will. But he couldn't penetrate her; a protective web shrouded her mind and psychic shock waves blasted him each time he tried to break through. Panic seized Tukalo as he slid back into Cath Beckett. But his hold on her was tenuous, the damage he'd inflicted on her mind too serious, leaving little for him to control. Terror sucked at his essence, threatening to dissipate his being.

With a tremendous effort of will, he forced Cath Beckett to raise a fist and punch screaming Deborita in the face. She collapsed and Tukalo staggered out, desperation alone getting him as far as the street. He stumbled a few yards then fell among the gutter bums. He screamed with her last strength as they swarmed over her, frantic hands pawing her body. Tukalo opened her eyes, saw the face of his new host, and gratefully made the leap.

Tukalo dogged Dee Funicelli from the office where she worked to a juice arcade in Piccadilly. He was a young black girl called Edie Via who lived in a box beneath the Embankment. He'd been her for two days, slowly swamping her mind with his will.

It was three months since he'd tried to get inside the head of Deborita Fell. The need for Apollonia was a dull ache inside his being. He couldn't bear the thought that she wanted someone else. After all they'd been through, the lives they'd shared, the beings they'd used. They'd feared nothing, known no illness or injury in ten years; only for her stupid qualms, it would never have had to end. He'd tried drugs, alcohol, the arcades; nothing had been able to wipe her from his mind. It was impossible to understand why she'd reject the wandering when it had given her the power to control her destiny. Why did she want to go back to the old life of choiceless mediocrity, where she was no different from the sheep she once controlled?

For the sake of Deborita Fell. She'd taken steps to protect her. And since he'd never get inside Deborita, never be able to use her body to regain Apollonia's love, he really had only one option.

He'd kill the worthless bitch.

Trying to enter her mind had been a mistake, Tukalo realised as he watched Dee Funicelli feed coins into the machine that embraced her body. Apollonia would have strengthened the defensive web around her lover's mind. But she couldn't protect her from a physical attack. With Deborita out of the way, she'd realise her mistake. He'd have to flatter her, of course, praise the extravagance of Michael's design – that would dull the edge of her anger – anything, as long as he got back the one he needed.

Part of Edie Via's mind was wondering what she was doing there, another strand pondered over

the gun in her handbag. Dee unhooked herself from the machine and made her way to the toilet. Tukalo followed and made Edie wash her hands as she waited for Dee to exit the cubicle.

Dee came out and Edie turned to face her. "Do you know what it's like?"

Dee Funicelli glanced at her, a quizzical look on her face. "What what's like?" she said.

"To fuck with someone's mind," Tukalo said as Edie reached out and touched the other girl. Fear and loathing greeted him inside Dee's head, but Tukalo quelled her emotion, submerged her persona inside his own. Edie Via was sitting on the floor, sobbing and mumbling some incoherent prayer. Evidence. A waste, Apollonia would say, but no connections. Tukalo reached down and picked up Edie's bag. He removed the automatic pistol and shot her in the face. He slipped the gun inside Dee's jacket and left the building.

He could feel Dee Funicelli trying to fight him, but her efforts were no distraction. Yeah, he'd have liked time to play with her. Still, take care of business first. He got off the tram in Brixton thirty minutes later, satisfied with a couple of scenarios he'd mapped out for later on, for Apollonia and Dee. The third key he tried let him in to Deborita's block, and up on the third floor, when he entered the apartment, he found her on the sofa, reading a magazine. He noticed the sheen of Apollonia's aura surrounding her flesh, her mental protection.

Deborita looked up. "Thought you were going to the arcade?" Tukalo sensed her annoyance.

"Changed my mind," he said.

"Oh, well, I see," Deborita said. She stood up and made her way to the kitchen. Tukalo noticed the slight swell of her stomach and felt pangs of resentment and envy. He followed her.

"Michael's coming round, isn't he?" Tukalo guessed. It made no difference. "I'm in the way?"

Deborita sighed and shook her head. "I thought I could be alone with him tonight, but, oh bugger it, never mind."

"No, it's all right. I'll go out."

"You don't have to."

Don't shit me, Deborita, Tukalo thought. Want me out of the way so you can cosy up to the one I need. You're out of the picture now, in the past. And his confidence let Dee Funicelli make one last effort to warn her friend. "Deborita," she cried, before he snuffed her out.

"What is it?" Deborita said, turning to look at Dee. Her eyes widened as she saw the vacuum in her friend's eyes. "Dee, what's wrong?"

"You are," Tukalo said as he pulled the gun from Dee's jacket.

"Oh Christ, Dee, what's going on?" Terror crawled up Deborita's face as she backed into a corner. "Mike said, he said, someone . . ."

"Shut up," Tukalo said. "You're pregnant?"

"Yes, Dee. Don't hurt me."

"You shouldn't have stolen her from me," Tukalo said.

"Who? I don't understand. Please."

"You never will understand. Dee's gone now, a ghost. Like you." He aimed the gun at her chest then heard a voice calling out from the hallway.

"Deborita! He's here."

"Shit," Tukalo said and shot Deborita in the chest. She slumped against the fridge and slid to the floor, trying to speak. He shot her again, in the stomach this time, at the baby. Her body shook and her lips moved slowly, but all that came out were small bubbles of blood. Then the door to the flat opened and Michael staggered in.

"Tukalo," he cried out, his voice strangled. He fell to his knees and began to crawl towards Deborita. "Why'd you do it?"

Tukalo was confused. What was wrong with Apollonia? Why was her aura wavering around Michael? "I, I didn't mean for you to see this, Apollonia," he said. "But you gave me no choice."

Apollonia manoeuvred the body up on one arm, and stared at him. Tukalo looked into the vacant, grey-ice eyes, and felt a sliver of fear sink

into his being. She crawled on towards her lover.

"Apollonia?" What was happening? "Get out of her, quickly. Go into Michael."

"It's over, Tukalo," Apollonia said. "I'm inside both of them, and in the child, not shaping them, just protection because I knew you'd come back. I knew it and I should have left her, left them both." Michael's breath came in ragged gasps as he reached Deborita. The latter shuddered once as the surrounding aura blinked out, then was still. "I was afraid of what would happen, spread myself too thin, three minds, couldn't be sure she'd be okay if I withdrew."

"Get out of her now," Tukalo pleaded. "She's bloody gone."

"Never forget."

"Pull your strands inside Michael. You can do that?"

"I won't. I was inside the child and it was alive then, and now, didn't think you'd . . . made no plan . . . shared their pain and now they're gone." Another tremor passed through Michael's body. "You don't know how it is, to feel death that way."

"Please come out," Tukalo said. "I can't stand it."

Apollonia laid Michael's head on Deborita's bloodied chest. He closed his eyes and his laboured breaths grew fewer till they finally faded, like her aura. Tukalo clutched the gun in his hand, unable to comprehend what had happened. He slumped to the floor beneath the kitchen window and stared at the bodies, watching for some sign of life, some movement in the flesh, either one. For a long time he watched them, hoping that perhaps some faint spark still lingered there, some spark he could reanimate with what was left of his strength. Or that the door would open and in she would come in some new guise, just for him, just like old times. So he sat there patiently and waited for someone, some body to come, to bring him nepenthe.

But no one did, not even ghosts.





Freight team on the main street of Mogollón

Working For The Forest Service

Gina Mitchell was up for consideration for a permanent position with the Forest Service this year. However, due to budget cutbacks, another job was eliminated, so the person who had it had to be given the available position.

Gina is a little relieved not to have the hassle of that job, but the security sure would have been nice. "It's all very well," she says, "when people in executive positions talk about belt tightening. What it means to them is smaller expense accounts and less frequent raises. For young people like me, what it means is wondering if you're ever going to get a real start in life. It's a little scary."

There have been cuts in seasonal jobs too. However, Gina does have her old position back, and she was real glad to start working again.

Her first assignment was to check a number of the trails to see where maintenance is needed after the

winter. "Every now and then you get to do something that's both sensible and fun," Gina commented.

How beautiful it was. Spring was in the air. Flowers were blooming. Leaves were budding. Birds were singing. "Almost felt guilty getting paid to tour such wonderful country," she said. "But it is useful. One of the most popular approaches to the Wilderness had a big rockslide we weren't aware of. Checking it out early, we can get a crew on it and have it clear before most of the tourists show up."

Gina also had an experience that made her just as glad not to have that other job. One evening, she got back to the ranger station to drop off her Forest Service truck and her latest report. As she entered, she heard a shrill voice coming from the very office that would have been hers if she had gotten that permanent position:

"I completely ruined a new pair of shoes. And I think I strained a

muscle. The mud must have been up to my knees."

"Ma'am, it's been a wet spring."

"You're paid to provide services. It is inexcusable having a public trail in such a condition."

"Ma'am, it is a National Forest, not a city street."

"How dare you speak to me like that. You are a public servant."

The irate woman finally left, threatening every sort of legal vengeance. Gina took Pete Padilla, the victim of the tirade, out for a beer. "Funny thing," Gina said. "Just today I had a really heartwarming encounter. I must have been a good three miles up the trail, and it was muddy. When what should I come on but a woman with braces on both legs and crutches. You could see it was hard for her to get up there, and she must have fallen somewhere too, cause she had dried mud all up one side. But all she had to say was how beautiful everything was." ●

The Poll

Melissa Farnsworth and Gina Mitchell want to increase tourism in Mogollón, so they have been trying to come up with something to attract attention. They were into their second pot of coffee the other morning when Melissa had a real brainstorm:

"Hah! I've got it," she declared. "We'll get our congressman to come up here and have Uncle River interview him."

"Think he'd come?" Gina replied.

"Why not? How many congressmen even have anyplace as interesting as Mogollón in their district?"

Gina could not argue with that logic. As with most ideas, however, this one led to far more talk than action. In fact, without anyone even thinking about approaching the poor unsuspecting congressman in question, the whole town got in on the discussion.

Jim Farnsworth, always sensitive to politics, voiced the isolationist position: "You're nuts. You crazy women want to ruin this place? The last thing we need is more attention — or more tourists."

George and Stella Nevil both agreed. George, who is usually quite amiable, was practically snarling. "I hate tourists. I'd eat cactus and drink pine needle tea before I'd depend on being a servant to some snoot for a living."

Gina was a bit shocked to see George so worked up, but then she has only been here two years.

Melissa proposed taking a poll of the whole town. Jim supported the idea and added, "Why not. Keep ya out of mischief for a while." Melissa threw a medium-sized heavy object at Jim. Jim ducked. The poll did get underway eventually. It was not very systematic, but here are some sample responses.

Elvira Sonderfeld has not bothered with politics in fifteen or twenty years and did not know who our current congressman is. She thought it might be fun. She wondered if he would like his picture taken with the bears. "That mayor from Germany that came through in 1964 loved it."

Elvira does not think it will have any effect on tourism one way or another, however.

Armand Tremolo believes the whole idea is hopelessly impractical. "No congressman has time to get here. Why it takes me an hour and a half to drive the nine miles from the highway."

"Probably takes that long for him to drive nine miles in Washington traffic all the time," Melissa replied. "If I drive him up it'll only take twenty minutes."

"If you drive," said Jim, "he'll

have heart failure."

Lionel and Gretchen Pickens were in favor of the interview. Bulldog and Petunia had no opinion. The Zabris-kis' response was completely incoherent, but even Melissa had to admit they did not seem to like the idea. Joe Malloney and Sam Jaramillo were away working in the woods. Mort Walker would not come to his door.

Jim wanted to put Mort down as opposed, but Melissa disagreed. "He doesn't give a hoot what the rest of us do just as long as we keep it away from him." ●

Poor

Joe Malloney and Sam Jaramillo have been out of work for a while. Neither one of them really minds living on beans and rice. But when Jim Farnsworth cut off their tab at the Bloated Goat, they began to feel seriously poor.

Joe and Sam were hanging around in the spring sunshine the other afternoon talking about ways to get rich and hoping someone would buy them a beer when Lionel Pickens happened along. By many people's standards, Lionel's social security and his pension from teaching high school history do not add up to much. The mine is shut down, however, and the woods have been too wet to get out to work in. By Mogollón standards, Lionel's regular checks are a major fortune.

Lionel knew perfectly well what was on Sam and Joe's minds. He was in the mood for company, so he invited them down to the Bloated Goat and bought a pitcher. The conversation remained in an economic vein as Joe and Sam recounted how poor they were. Lionel was not impressed.

"You don't know what poor is," he said. "Why I remember a time when I was young, back on the farm in Arkansas. It was a horrible year. Nothing made. There wasn't enough corn for the still. Even the okra died. In fact, there just wasn't a thing to eat

but turnips. Tomatoes died. Chickens died. Pa wanted to kill the mule to eat, but Ma talked him out of it. Only thing that would grow was turnips.

"Naturally, with no crops, we couldn't buy anything, so we didn't go to town that year. Nothing to sell. No money to buy anything with. Nothing to eat but turnips. We didn't even have salt. It was grim.

"Finally, after months and months, I got wind of a chance to cut some fenceposts. Walked twenty-seven miles, barefoot, with an ax over my shoulder, but it was worth it. I got two and a half days' work and came away with money in my pocket. Money was real back then too. Silver always did have a beautiful sound to it. On my way home, I stopped in town for some supplies.

"Well, I was young; didn't get to eat in a restaurant much even in good times. I just couldn't resist to have a meal at the café. Waitress came over and set my place, smiled at me, and said, 'What would you like to order?'

"I thought a minute and then answered: 'Believe I'll have my turnips fried today.' I still remember the look on her face. It'd been so long, I'd forgot there was anything else."

Joe and Sam allowed as times maybe weren't so bad after all, especially when Lionel bought a second pitcher. ●


RICHARD KADREY

*The
First
Man
Not To
Walk
On The
Moon*

You could often find the astronaut at the Elbo Room on the weekends. He'd stop by for a drink and stay the whole afternoon with the regulars, howling at the football games, basketball playoffs, hockey championships, whatever was on the big-screen TV. No one ever commented on this, even though everyone knew that he hated team sports. They just bought him drinks, patted him on the back and tried not to mention the moon or NASA or, really, anything that flew.



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KLOSTERMAN



The Elbo Room regulars felt sorry for the guy. He'd never made it, never set foot on the moon. He'd piloted the retrieval ship twice—once for his original mission, and once as a backup when the scheduled pilot became ill. The only man on the planet, the regulars liked to remind their friends, who'd been to the moon TWICE, and never set foot on the damned thing. No wonder he drank.

Lily had tried to get through to the spaceman a few times. The year before she'd spent months reading up on him, on the moon program, on NASA, all to get a little closer to him. She'd heard he had money. Some of the articles hinted that NASA pensioned him off quickly when the moon program had been canceled. His mind, apparently, had snapped. But his pension was a tidy one, a silence-buyer. And there was his best-selling, if weirdly rambling, autobiography, *The First Man Not To Walk On The Moon*. The astronaut was painfully shy though, and in the end she'd gotten nowhere with her flirtations. But Lily didn't accept No easily. That's why, a little tipsy, she followed the astronaut home that Sunday. It was July third, and the streets were decked in red, white and blue for the Fourth. Kids set off sky rockets and roman candles on street corners and the fireworks burst overhead like stars, like meteorites, like miniature Challenger disasters, above the patriotic bunting.

The astronaut lived alone in a huge whitewashed Victorian at the top of a steep hill overlooking the city. He strolled up the hill and entered his house, without looking over his shoulder. Good start, Lily thought. She waited just below the crest of the hill, catching her breath and giving the astronaut a few minutes to relax. She reasoned that he would be more receptive to her if she allowed him to be secure in his own environment. When she'd caught her breath, Lily checked her hair, then went to the door and rang the bell. When the door opened, Lily let out a little shriek.

It was the astronaut. His head encased in a bright glass bubble, his body covered in a bulky white spacesuit. The astronaut looked huge to Lily, like some extraterrestrial polar bear. Still, when he beckoned her inside, she went. The astronaut led her casually through the house. It was quite lovely on the inside, Lily thought. A decorator, probably. High Victorian. The patterned wallpaper. The potted palms and knick-knacks on the shelves. It was like the photos in her mother's scrap-books, like stepping through to another time. The astronaut didn't say anything to Lily, didn't acknowledge her at all until he'd taken her down a spiral staircase into a sub-basement (the astronaut having to squeeze around the tight corners in his bulky spacesuit), and they stopped in front of a door that looked like an old bank vault. The astronaut pointed to the wall where another

spacesuit hung. Lily asked if he wanted her to put the suit on, and the astronaut nodded. What the hell, she thought, pulling the bottom half of the suit up over her legs. There was that bookstore clerk who liked me to get dressed up as a nurse, and that teacher who had a positive thing for lady cops...When she had trouble with a fastener or lock, the astronaut helped her. Finally, when her helmet was on tightly, he smiled and gave her a thumbs-up. Before she could give one back, the astronaut cut the lights. Lily suddenly was scared. She felt the astronaut behind her, pushing her forward, past the bank vault door which he'd opened in the darkness. His hands were suddenly all over her, attaching things to her. Lily could feel a weird tension pulling against her arms and legs, felt herself lifted slightly off the floor each time she moved. She screamed, but the sound was trapped with her in the helmet. She gulped in air, unable to catch her breath, her arms and legs being tethered to more and more cables until it suddenly stopped. And the light came back.

It was white and soft, like suspended snow, blinking sometimes in the corner of her eyes. A beautiful blue ball hung above Lily's head, the Earth, and she reached for it—and felt herself lifted gently off her feet by the low gravity of...Where?

The moon, she knew instinctively, and when she looked around, the gray dust, craters and the impressive old lunar module confirmed it. She spotted the astronaut then, standing shyly in the shadow on the spacecraft. He was smiling at Lily in

the strangest way. It was wounded and elated at the same time, like a kid getting to tell a secret that he'd been bursting with. As the astronaut came toward Lily, in the low-grav bunny-hops just like she'd seen on the news, the wires that gently lifted him were barely visible in the faint light. In fact, if Lily squinted just a little bit, the wires disappeared. She flexed own arms and legs, getting the feel for being one-sixth her normal weight. Lily decided she liked it. Her body felt light and young, unburdened. The astronaut settled beside her in a small spray of moon dust (which also fell slowly due to the microscopic air jets cleverly hidden in the floor). He took Lily's hand and, flexing his legs in time with hers, hopped Lily to the lunar module. She sensed that despite the beauty of the house upstairs, this was where the astronaut spent most of this time. Lily was surprised at herself for liking that idea. He had walked on the moon after all, she thought. If it wasn't everyone else's moon, that was all right. He was willing to share it with her. The astronaut started up the ladder to the cabin of the command module, then reached down to help Lily. She took one more look around at the surface of the moon, their moon now. If he's the last man to walk on the moon, she thought, then I'm the first woman. She wondered if this had been a silent proposal of some sort. Had he waited for her on other Sundays? She'd ask him about that later. Right now, she thought—on seeing the banks of controls inside the command module—there was an awful lot to learn. □

BELCH OF THE FIRE- EATER

by Jill McGroarty



*An overlarge foetus
unwound itself into an
insecure adult male and
reached for a beerpack.
Tope could only live with
his head between his
knees for so long; his
bags hadn't seen a
washerette since the
accident and his boots
were a permanent graft.
Time for another placebo.*

His bedsit was a second womb, another line of defence where he could float unmolested until the landlord broke the waters with his minders' insistent pounding on the door. Then Tope, gasping for air, would have to surrender his innocence once more until the back rent was paid off, sometime around the Big Crunch. It had gone beyond arrears. They wanted his soul.

He had been left his personal property so far – too much junk to be marketed as idiosyncratic oddities – with his feigned indifference bluffing them out of downright destruction. It was a desperate act; those things had been left to him by the only person in the world he was really connected to. And she was a stranger.

How could he look into the head of the person who had carted around an antique CD collection of thirties music, a 1989 film and video guide (a book, no less!), a carved wooden duck, a dancing cola tin with shades, a portable deck, an M-satphone and a baby. In no particular order of priority.

He knew which had been the afterthought. She always said he'd been conceived at a Hackers' conference (someone had no problem getting in ...) but swore blind it was an immaculate conception from a VDU screen. He half believed her, with his cute little pixel face gazing up at her damp fringe, tab on her tongue like a communion wafer; the last coherent acknowledgement for some while.

Uncle Loop-E had brought him up in the early days. He remembered families. Had one himself, somewhere, so he said. All the others on the circuit ignored or indulged Tope until he could link up for himself. It brought tears to the old technohippy's eyes when his little Topaz went on line for the first time, puppy fat fingers keying his handle to the world's treasury.

She, of course, had snorted. Air for once.

"He's called 'Isotope' you dimshit. Doped like his three matres, me and the ugly sisters."

Venom and Blue Dame smiled, up to a point. They never knew if her arrows were seriously barbed. Tope didn't like the way they smelt. Different from her, though he'd never been close enough to really find out. She'd never held him, as far as he could remember. Loop-E waited until she was asleep before he dared change an improvised diaper.

When Tope was rich and famous, he would build a bathhouse and live in it, with slaves to scrape off the gunk. He owed it to himself. But for now, he had to weigh up if it was worth risking the streets for a hike to the washerette and a ration of soapy water for himself and the clothes he stood up in. His credit with the water company was not good. He'd washed twice already last month after the dysentery outbreak in the flat below and his account would be cleaned out before he was. Better wait. He'd smelt worse. The wooden duck wasn't complaining.

She had taunted Loop-E with the alternative history of being Tope's sperm donor.

"I bluebox phreaked him," she crowed, "he never knew we'd connected."

Venom spat and Blue Dame cackled at the well-worn jibe, on cue, like true soul sisters. Loop-E registered hurt, deep inside, but had an Oscar-rigged shrug of nonchalance as defence. One day it broke down and he left for good.

Tope always wondered if the cola can with shades was his. She had kept it 'til she died. Had to prise it out of her hand to stop the Trustparas junking it when they loaded her on the stretcher. An anonymous benefactor paid the hospital fees and Tope kept the inheritance, wondering if any of those few possessions would turn out to have deep and mystical significance, if he lived long enough.

He wouldn't bet on it though.

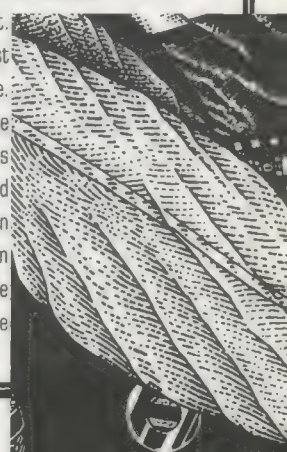
The crew split up and went their separate ways, Venom staying on for a couple of weeks to initiate Tope into the joys of bodysuit. But her clients called and the spotty adolescent was slow at rigging credit. He was not a natural like his mother and was relieved that Loop-E wasn't around to witness his ward's gradual descent down the ratings of social acceptability.

It wasn't so much his lack of muscle and style, erratic education or dubious class, colour, religion or even DNA profile. Not in this Cowardly Old World. It was the fact that he couldn't rig any of them. Tope was the Ancient Order of Hackers' worst nightmare: a throwback, a retard, an abomination in the eyes of on-line society.

Tope was technophobic.

It wouldn't have been so bad if he had turned out to be a straightliner, with a proper job, earning credit. Difficult, true, but not impossible. But he just couldn't cope with logging on for days at a time.

It made him break out into a sweat, his pulse went off scale, his eyes unfocused and he was as password bound as a piece of constipated software. Even first level access had been denied on occasion and he was now seriously in danger of being thrown out of Aetherlon, while the blessed Isle retreated into the mist before



his eyes. Tope just couldn't hack it any more. But neither could he live without it.

The phobia stopped short of forcing him to ditch his equipment, tacky and outdated as it was; not kitsch enough to be collectible, not fast enough to be serviceable. Even unused, he had to have it near him. It was the only cuddly toy his generation had known.

People didn't live for long outside the InfoMist.

Okay. Stuff the credit. What had Loop said about the old days when cashpoint machines went down and people kicked walls and swore a lot? The only crumb of comfort had been watching the faces on the rest of the queue as you told them, apparently.

Tope wondered how many people it took to form a queue. Ten bodies = one queue? You could hold a party with a queue. A microcosmic community, who would rally together in the face of shared adversity and hold a sustainable conversation. One that wasn't composed of second-hand samples. Or so said Loop-E, the wannabe social historian. He'd always promised to download some of the films in Tope's bible. Whole films, with a beginning, middle and end. If anyone could scour old vidbases, it was Loop. But now he was gone, with a comet's tail of false hopes and charged emotions flaring out in his wake.

With no forwarding @.

Tope poked at his remaining foodpack with a tentative boot. By the time he set up a supermarket scam, the landlord would be back for more rent. And, wimp though he was, he was not the sort of boy to take this lying down for ever. It was time to move on.

The reliquary bus station had no ports for travelling decks. So he finally traded it in for a seat at the fire, a swig of cider and a bag of flaky pastry with chunks of mad cow. It was a banquet fit for kings of the road. But he was only a squire at this court, so tactfully withdrew to a confessional urinal to curl up and sleep in the absence of a priest, his lucid dreams punctuated with the expected knife in the back.

*He woke, alive against
all odds, with the
morning sun through
the open roof sucking
vapour from his cubicle
and pencilling in the
wrinkles of his package-
tent bedfellows. All
old enough to have
delayed logging on until
left at the side of the
road, splashed in virtual
mud from fasttrack
embryos like Tope should
have been. Pad people.
Would they adopt him
or want revenge?*

Surprisingly, he found them more animated than their sitcom myths, insinuated and the snoring bundles of his twilight street entry had hinted. They stretched, they yawned, they spoke to each other - they even smiled. Wasn't this supposed to be Dante's hell, losing your way into silicon heaven?

Not all of them were old either. The deckfence was chatting to a young woman, with long dark hair in a pleit, black army denims, Docs and ankle-length black PVC coat. Where did she get off buying street crap hardware? They both looked his way as the fence pointed him out and he had a feeling he was about to find out.

Tope froze like a trapped rabbit. At least, like a locked-out rabbit icon, which was the closest he could manage. Did she have a piece under that coat which could rip him in half or back-up on the rooftops, sights

lasering in? She strode towards him, coat flapping in the backdraft like a shimmer of black body radiation. He felt his own body heat rise in a synchronous swell when he focused in on the dewicked

spicules of black hair on her domed forehead. She drew to a halt in front of him, looked him over and took her hand out of her coat pocket.

"Hello," she offered her palm, "I believe you have a satellite phone for sale?"

He stared at the slim brown hand as if it were the logo for Death Inc. Her lips barely twitched and she withdrew it, waiting patiently without flaming insult for his response. He looked up into steady dark eyes, not overlaid with the usual lustful hostility of his mother's friends. Innumerable bodysuit games had screamed at him to "hump it or dump it" until gender i.d. was blurred in the Mist. Now here was another female; not a transsexual like Venom or sometimes dominatrix nanny like Blue Dame, but a real woman. Soft-spoken, polite, a glow of live intelligence in her face, unerasable by tabs, giving him the benefit of the doubt before she ate him for breakfast.

"Yehthat'srightIwanttogetridofit," he admitted too easily, seduced by the confessional grille casting a shadow across his foot.

"Well, perhaps we can come to some arrangement. I know a possible buyer I can introduce you to. A collector of antiques from recanters. Come with me."

She turned confidently, as if in no doubt that he would follow her. With his luggage. And the word "recanter" sprawled on his tongue like a stowaway insect, whose poison he could only guess at.

He stared at the bus. It was the last thing he had expected to see at a bus station. Single deck shuttle - "Hoppa" in faded lettering. People - those queues again - had travelled on these. Rubbing shoulders. He swallowed hard.

"It's alright," she seemed to understand, "we're the only ones using



it and it's rigged for methane. No credit required. Just hop on and enjoy the ride."

He sat, tense, white-knuckled, as she piloted the bus manually out of the city and into country lanes. There were no screens showing the luscious green of enhanced landscape samples, but Windows let in moving trees that were yellow and grey. Like a watercolour clip whose pixel paint had washed off in the acid rain of reality. Nature, beautiful in all her little imperfections.

"I'm Rachel, by the way," she threw over her shoulder.

"Ra-shell," he repeated, childlike, spellbound by the forces of a rattling bus over deteriorated roads. The mad cow remnants threatened to end symbiosis with him, but held on until they reached a farmhouse, where they splattered noisily onto his boots.

Rachel wrinkled her snub nose and grinned.

"Bet you'd like some decent food, huh? Come on in, lunch should be ready soon."

A dour-faced man in wellingtons lurched from an outhouse. He might have known Ra-shell wouldn't deal without her own minders. He hoped this business would go down well or he would never walk straight again. The open blue sky terrified him and Tope ducked into the dark porchway, panting.

"He wants a good hosing down," noted the surly bodyguard.

"Yes, Da. I'll offer him the sink though. Hot water on?"

"Pan on the range should be ready."

Rachel showed him the porcelain sink in the wash house and went to fetch the hot water while Tope squirmed with indecision. What was going on? He couldn't afford hot water. Would that be deducted from his price or did they have another trade-off in mind? And where in hell was he?

Liquid brown eyes gave him the once over. Then she left him to wash, saying his place would be set at table. His tears mixed with hot steam as he scrubbed and scrubbed and scrubbed ...

Fifteen faces were gathered around the large oak trestle. A queue and a half, reducing Tope to silence while he laid into the roast lamb like a condemned prisoner. A grey-haired harpy, glasses perched on nose in cartoon grandma style, was first to speak.

"So you brought us a real penitent, Rachel?"

"He was trying to offload a BB-6000 for a week-old pasty," announced the sultry princess. Forks scraped plates and jaws chewed thoughtfully. The old madam's face was chiselled from granite.

"Could be a bluff."

"It checked out. Unregistered. He's not a frustrated straightliner like the others, but a native. I reckon he was in a technopagan commune from birth, poor little sod."

"How are the mighty fallen," the harridan muttered. "Well boy, so you have a satphone to trade. What make?"

He had to admit he'd never used it, it was his mother's, he'd never seen her use it either; he wasn't sure if it had ever worked, even when new, it was just ... baggage. He didn't know what words to use when he was on diplomatic no-man's land, if not totally alien soil. If he tried to talk it up, they would spot him for a fake.

"And what else did she bequeath you?"

He chanced upping the stakes on the CDs, joked about the duck and kept quiet about the can-with-shades. The crone nodded slowly. She could have had his backpack searched, but had chosen to go along with this list for now, it seemed. He had laid out his stall, now it was their turn. But the initiation ordeal continued.

"And what do you want from us?"

Now came the crunch. He had to make his pitch sound good.

"I need treatment. I can't work the keys any more without cracking up. I'll settle for a straight user i.d. or some aversion therapy, but I've gotta hack to stay alive. Can you help?"

The tablecrowd exchanged sidelong looks. Then Grandma threw back her head and laughed, long and loud, only stopping when she saw his tortured expression and Rachel's lifted eyebrow. He had the impression that he had failed a test.

"You're serious aren't you," Grandma wiped her glasses. "You really believe that pile of infant crap you're dragging around with you is actually worth something? As if you could bring it here and do business with it? We want recanters who are prepared to renounce their worldly goods and repent their sins. Look around you, boy. Is there a deck





in sight? A screen? A helmet? No, not a phone even. How do you think we live?"

He couldn't imagine.

"There's only one thing you can offer us. Come up with that, we'll talk. Now, finish your meal."

He stared at his plate. Unmoving in case the old lady had a sawn-off shotgun under the table, pointing at his peripherals. He didn't have the language to deal with these people. A random flow

of unconnected images would have suited him, or fantasies of Ra-shell in a stream of consciousness sequence, with mood lighting and rock tracks, intercut with token gore and pornomorphic graphics.

But they all remained stubbornly solid, tucking into their food and conversation with bared white teeth. A whole crew ... a family ... together. He couldn't interact with them without an edit facility. He was helpless. But then, what was new? Tope couldn't bounce an electron off course with his personality, let alone this roomful of vibrant, healthy animals.

Later, Rachel showed him around the village. It was linked to a network of other villages by road, not wire.

Connected by a system of barter and exchange of goods, services, "Lets" or "Acorns" – whatever medium of exchange was agreed on. Everything except E-cash.

"We could use cowpats, if we had to," she said, grinning as he stepped in one. Was there life after disconnection? Tope wanted to throw up, either from withdrawal or the excess of sunlight on his flaccid, pale skin. He leaned against a tree trunk while Rachel's expression flipped between concern and patrician amusement. What did she want from him? He had nothing left to give.

A flock of children scampered out of the scrub, to gawp at the body on the wood as if he were an equinox barleycorn man to sacrifice. Tope's rear tried to merge with the bark. Little people terrified him, their faces were too knowing, familiar ghosts ...

One nut-brown urchin, finger in mouth, offered him a piece of fruit. He took it, rictus smile aching.

"This is Alouette," said Rachel, "and that's Ohzura, from our village. The others are from scattered farmhouses. We feed ourselves now, as the supermarts don't buy from small farmers. We're too small for chemically induced plantations. That crap has poisoned your gut for real food."

The wood elves watched fascinated as Tope lost his lamb. Rachel waved them away and helped him stagger to the nearest house, a former Post Office, as the weathered plaque whispered. What dungeon of inquisitional relics had she come up with now?

He was glad to get out of the light into a stonecool room. Its host appeared to be expecting them.

"How goes your trawl for recanters, my dear?"

"I don't think we'll have time to turn around any more to send back into town. This one's a write-off anyway. The system spat him out and he can't even ghost an i.d. Tried to offload his kit onto our contact without knowing who he was. Suicide bid, if you ask me."

Ice-cool blue eyes under ridged grey brows locked a scan onto the washed out, anorexic refugee. The man was old enough to be God Himself at the Last Judgement, as the evangelists ranted, in the dying echoes of Tope's emptying mind. For whom Grandma had just been a warm-up act.

So, he'd been kidnapped by an alt.cult. Torture was all talk. No one did. Not for real. He'd unplug from this game, just as soon as he'd engineered some gratuitous sex with the luscious Ra-shell.

She turned her back on him and left him alone with God. Who gave him a glass of spring water, salted, and a flannel and who talked while Tope sipped. God had a friend, a Dr Sokar, an expert in plasma diagnostics, who had become most animated by his latest discoveries. Messages were arriving via a certain gem on the hat of Columbus, the explorer. Scintillation phenomena in the ionosphere were increasing dramatically.

Tope's features were as blank as the walls.

God sighed and stroked his beard.

"I suppose your science education was cut up into digestible chunks for you, like your mother cutting your food."

An intercut memory of Tope's – her pre-chewing stuff

like some animal and spitting it into his mouth. He hoped it was because she just couldn't be bothered to hack deliveries of baby food.

God tried again.

"In 1942, the Brits thought the Germans had a secret weapon for jamming their radar, until they made some inquiries at a French observatory. In 1972, the Earth's rotation was knocked out of kilter by 0.1 second. In 1989, six million people lost electrical power and nuclear stations were shut down for 72 hours."

His litany barely registered. Tope licked the salt from his lips.

"The Ulysses probe sent back some interesting information about fluctuations in the Sun's magnetic field. There are some major changes about to take place. Are you listening?"

Tope jerked his head up, waiting for info trickle-down to hit bottom. Sun-worshippers. All crackle and noise.

"Not all of our global communications can be shielded in time. Too expensive, they said. It'll never happen, they said, never investing in fibre optics for rural backwaters like ours, of course. So our off-line black economy rumbled on without it. Now the sun is going to clear its throat and you'll be like us. Unplugged for good. Better get used to it. The big one is going to hit."

Tope resisted the urge to applaud this mad lone voice crying in the wilderness. What was he supposed to do, throw himself on his knees and confess all his former sins, to come into the fold? He wiped his nose on his sleeve and stood up.

"So you front as a dealer in old commskit to lure green recruits to your survivalist farm labour camps, disguised as holiday retreats for the stressed out?" He sat down again, with the effort of that. The slate-grey beard trembled with amusement.

"This doesn't have to be a disaster scenario. People can be weaned off dependence on electronic lifestyles. We've been quietly preparing as many as possible since we've known. To prevent riots. When they've looted the supermarkets, where would they turn next? We don't have the arms to defend ourselves so we have to teach self-sufficiency. Or we'll all go down. You can help us if you want. The choice is yours."

His interview with God was over. An angel came to take him away.

Rachel didn't say much on the way back to the farmhouse. Perhaps she'd seen too many like him, onetime cutting edge now blunted with overuse, reduced to begging for those crumbs at the table.

He didn't want to have to beg for it. Not yet. Even if he practised the weeping tears and the plaintive set piece – "I've got nowhere else to gooooo!"

"Did you say something?"

"No."

"Right."

She kicked stones with her toecap, hands in pockets, full lips downturned and brooding, on leave from a rock babe

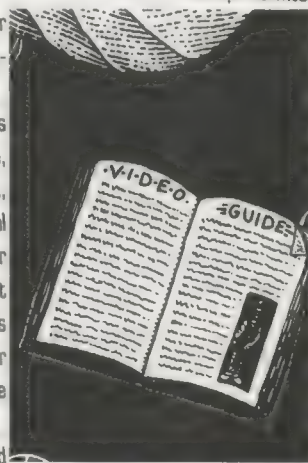
video. Some kind of bait to lure converted nerds to salvation. But her indifference was too light of touch for the faked come-on of a Hottub diva. She might even be barely registering him because he really didn't exist except as a shadow in her sunlit world.

And he'd never know, because he couldn't keyboard a neat way of asking her. Screen insults never hurt the way a live female face could drip contempt. He had been mothered by the Mistress of Scorn, so he should know and he didn't want to relive it now. Not with this girl. Let him remember her like this, strolling down a leaf-strewn

lane, shoulder to shoulder, a whole world of potential love stretching in front of them, as long as he never dared speak its name.

Sunlight ripped by overhanging branches licked his bare skin with yellow stripes, like the healing welts from bodysuit attachments after a heavy session with Venom. He couldn't recall if Venom had chosen to be human at the time. Only one afterimage stained his eyelids: someone soft, gentle and lovingly erotic. As a blueprint for life should he ever meet his real love. A whisper of how it should be, overwriting the downloaded trash he'd tapped into on a porn channel with the ugly sisters. Where was his gentle teacher now?

Soon, if this commune were right, that sunlight would blot out that trace as well. Group memory wiped like a neuron-crunching toxin. He'd be back on his own, for the first time since he was three. Should he skip down the lane, punching the air with freedom's cry?



It didn't seem to be bringing Rachel much joy. Hadn't she pulled the kind of recruits she wanted in her family's rural paradise, or did she keep her pets locked away in the barn? And where did all the renounced idols of wired sinfulness go when Grandma had confiscated them?

His only answer was a whiplash arm across his ribs, as Rachel braked him to a painful halt; those almond eyes narrowed with some arousal of panther instinct. Ahead of them, from the hedgerows, spare branches morphed into a street gang, as her prophesied ambush unrolled before them.

So it was not always idyllic out here.

He might have recognized these men anywhere — with any backdrop, truncated bark traded for crumbling brick, a drugcrazed yob was a universal constant. The hungry, sexstarved features were only pigment on pale skin, acquired traits welded on as fashion accessories. Tope, the eternal victim, cowered, waiting for fists and boots to replace rain on the weather forecast.

But his fantasy consort liked to dictate her timelines. She stepped forward, hands by hips and he realized through squinting eyes that she had indeed carried enough hardware to leave him as another smear on the station walls. Rachel herself hadn't recanted. She stood astride the border between on line and off, a hybrid, a half-caste, at ease in both worlds; the immigration officer for refugees from the InfoMist into the land of the Spitting Sun.

She stepped over the twitching bodies, looking back at him with defiant serenity.

"We've had trouble with them before, stealing our chickens and letting their dogs worry our sheep. Seth'll be along with the trailer in a minute."

A tractor icon to erase the screen. Tope followed her through an orchard, apples bulging with ripeness.

"Of course, come the Flare, they'll all be out here, foraging, no matter what we do to distract them. Mr Ribbon, you saw back there, thinks wipeout'll be a good thing. He's still upset about losing his business, wants some kind of global revenge on the electronic world, even if he does sneak a quick drag on it himself, now and again. Me, I prefer things as they are. Everyone finding their own corner and dealing from it."

A pretty speech from the beatified spiv. So she didn't believe in the prophet of doom either. They had something in common. Now was the moment to propose to her, surrender his soul to the mad mullah and his backpack to Grandma, then settle down on this frontier homestead to raise children in the fresh air.

Rachel picked an apple, opening her exercised lips for the guilty juice to well up from slits incised with lashed down

sensuality. She threw it to him. He muffed the catch, watching it roll into the grass, bruised and alone, too slick to hold. A swirl of black and she was gone, leaving him to stare at his feet in the lengthening shadows.

The return journey on the bus was over too quickly, when he relived Rachel's indifference to his fate. Her coat was carefully folded next to the driver's seat and he saw the smooth flow of her arm muscles as she handled the wheel. In a game, she would be submissive to his rippling hulk. In real life, she'd floor him if he laid a hand on her.

*He stood alone, in the bus station.
His CD collection donated to one
old farmer with a generator, the
duck floating on the village pond,
drawn with string by the waiflike
Alouette. Grandma hugged the
salthphone, chuckling away,
planning to call her sister in
Australia one last time. The
can-with-shades lay in his back-
pack, quietly smirking to itself.*

Maybe he'd try to find Loop-E. A name on a screen before it went blank. He'd eat the food they'd given him and try to mug someone with an unregistered deck, put the lie to the sun cult's propaganda. It was all bluff. He'd hussle a new network i.d. and overcome his allergy, someway.

He creased his eyes against the light and ducked into a warehouse doorway, clutching that miniature hitman, the can, as a last resort weapon. □



HEAD

Peter Finch

IT COMES TO A HEAD two years after they meet. Frank and Shirley, sitting in the bedroom with the sunlight on them through the blinds. Frank is a pretty ordinary sort of guy. He shifts copiers for a local dealership which is cutthroat stuff but has its rewards. Trouble is Frank can't be bothered most of the time. He is thirty, thin to the point of gauntness and wonders why things aren't better. Shirley doesn't help. She makes demands.

"Why don't we change this," she says to Frank pointing at some domestic item or, "Let's go to America," and Frank tots up how many units he'd have to move to make enough and then shakes his head.

SHIRLEY IS A HAIRDRESSER. When they meet she is styling at Salon Maurice and the idea of living together seems workable although as soon as she moves in Maurice goes down the pan and Shirley has to spend her unmonied days at home. To keep up the payments on everything Frank takes on more accounts, spends long evenings preparing pitches and wastes days away softening up customers far from home. All Shirley does is to shave her head down like Sinead O'Connor. Prickly bald, Jesus.

"You'll never get work looking like that," Frank tells her but she doesn't care. The room looks like a squat. Shirley smells of last night. The water is cold. Frank is finding the whole show a strain.

There is the dog too. A tough black collarless thing Shirley finds in the lane and wants to keep. Someone's pet far from home. She wants to bring it in and make it part of the

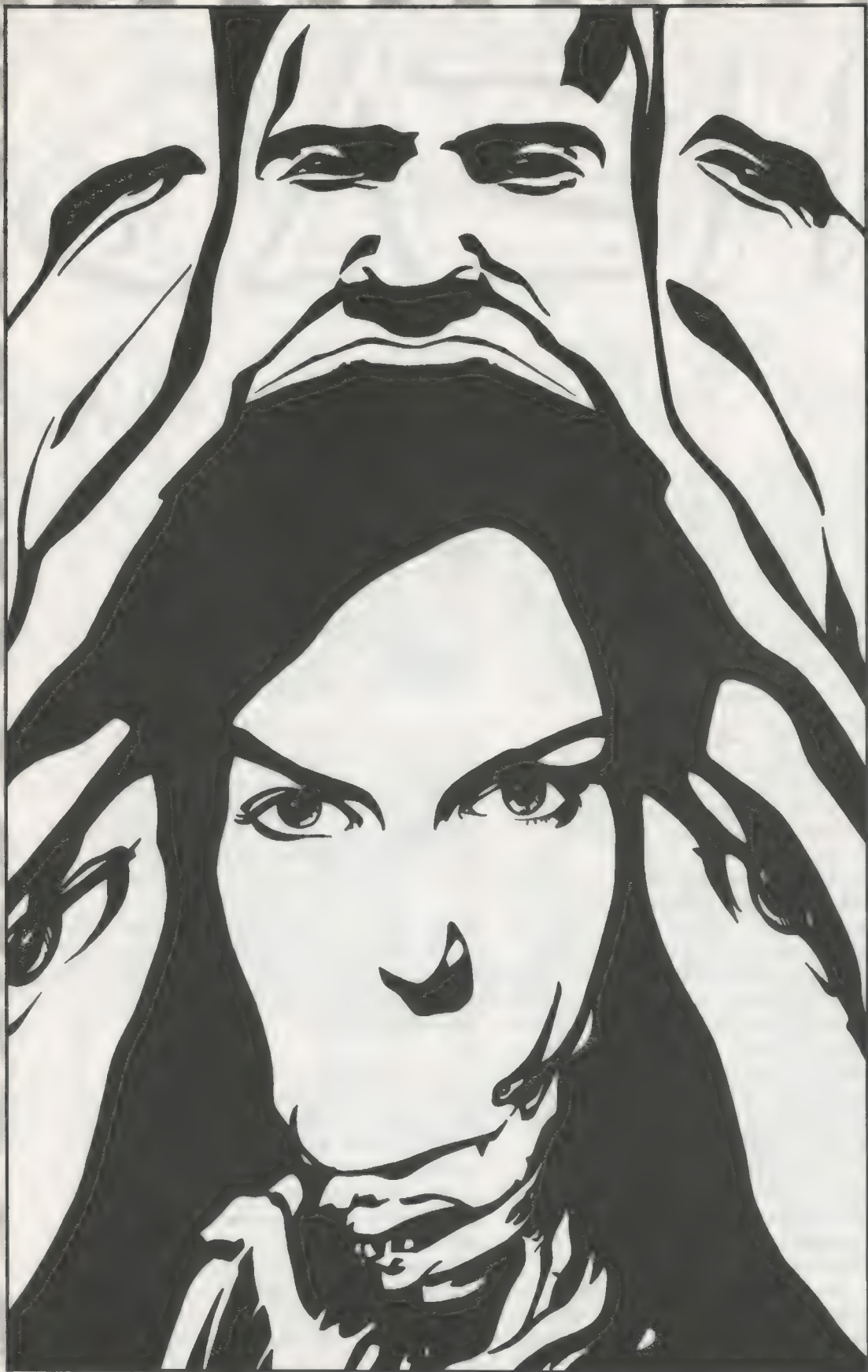
family, have it on the sofa and shitting on the rug. "No way," Frank tells her and when she looks really pissed relents a little and says, "Okay, but out back only. Never in here."

She buys it a tin bowl and a cupboard full of Kennomeat and feeds it behind the rose bushes. Frank isn't happy but he lets it go.

ONE EVENING FRANK COMES BACK from a long trip west so tired he has actually nodded on the motorway and has only just pulled himself back from hammering into the grey foundations of an overpass. He's shaken and needs a drink. He goes through the cupboards in the kitchen but should know better. Shirley suggests they try the King's Head and has a black jacket on already over her cotton shift which means she is going whatever Frank does. Back in the car, the motorway seems still to be sliding past the windscreen and the roar of the air is the same.

"YOU KNOW WHAT I'VE GOT HERE," says Shirley, showing Frank a cheap nylon sports bag, the kind you get free when you open a student's bank account. It's blue and cylindrical. In the state he's in Frank can't imagine. She swings the thing in the space between them and when it nudges Frank in the arm he can tell it's full. "A bowling ball?" he suggests and Shirley looks at him with a sort of contempt that tells him he's got it wrong.

"Try again," she says but Frank doesn't want to.



"Come on, Shirley, don't play games. I don't know. I'm tired."

And he is too, hasn't thought of sex or her tight, brown body in at least an hour. "Tell me."

She puts the bag down on the floor between her legs and turns in her seat.

"It's a head, Frank."

"Yeah."

"It is, really. You want to see it?"

"So. How is it a head?"

"Ears, nose, mouth, you know. The works. You need to see this. I want to show it to you."

She's got the tone in her voice he first heard way back when she undressed for him on their second date. "Look at this, baby. Try these." Pouting, licking her lips. How was he to know she'd turn out crazy.

"So show me."

She pulls the zip back a bit then quickly re-does it, turning to Frank who has got the wheel tight in his hands and is staring hard through the screen into the flickering night.

"I think you'd better stop. Pull over."

And he does, stopping under a high street lamp, where the pavement is dry and stark and empty. Shirley slides the bag open a second time and there it is, a head. Frank stares. A wig? But Shirley is lifting it up slowly by its brown locks and there is an ear and as she spins the object the pale white of a forehead and then two staring, unmoving eyes. It can't be real. He moves a hand over to feel it but Shirley stops him.

"Look. No touching," she gives him a wicked smile. It's that second date again. "It's real, if that's what you're wondering. Great, huh?"

It's right out of the bag now, staring at Frank with a half grin that pulls to one side and a three-day shadow. He can't see the neck, Shirley is steadying it. It has got to be real. Frank feels sick. Latex imitations don't make you feel like that.

"Jeez, Shirley. What is it? You can't keep it. What are doing with it?" Frank holds his mouth.

"It's a head. You know, a head." She says it like it's so obvious and why should he ask. "Can you drive?"

And they do. Up past the pub, which he doesn't even see, and Shirley has got the bag on her lap, rezipped now stroking it like a cat. They cross a bridge, high over the motorway.

"You've got to give it back," he tells her. Firm. But she's not going to.

"Who the hell are you to tell me?" she says with a wild edge in her voice that Frank has

not heard before. "I can do what I like with it."

The window is down and she's waving the bag out in the slipstream.

"Hey," yells Frank as the blue cylinder swings back, held by one looped handle, turning in a rapid arc and then it goes, sailing smaller through space, spinning past the concrete bridge struts and into the motorway darkness where Frank spots it briefly in the lights of a heavy tanker. Then it's gone, knocked forwards, rolled under, made flat and ripped and long. It is no longer a bag, not a head but a smear. Frank can't look but Shirley can. She keeps on staring until Frank drives on.

IN THE HOUSE they don't talk about it. Shirley doesn't. Frank asks lots of questions but she fields every one. Clamming is easy once you start. Stick to it. Don't let on. He buys scotch and puts it in the cupboard. When he goes to use it he finds another head sitting on the shelf among the glasses. No blood, same grin. He takes the bottle and, since the dog is in the yard, goes and sits in the car.

SALES ARE DOWN. His team leader tells him he's burned six hot leads and got nothing. If he goes on like this he'll be out. Frank goes on the sick. He gets Shirley to ring in and say he has a head cold. He sits about and tries to work out what is going on. Nothing is logical. The world is surreal. It is no use discussing it with Shirley. She either pretends she doesn't know what he's talking about or simply stays clammed. He feels as if the world has turned left and he's gone straight on. He rechecks the whisky cupboard and the bottle is still there and the head. There is another one too, a younger smaller head, on the middle shelf. This one has a full smile like it's been enjoying a warm conversational exchange just before being ripped. You can't really tell that, either. The necks show no sign of blood and Frank can't bring himself to push one over to get a better look.

HE NEEDS A WORKING HYPOTHESIS to get through this: Drugs, drink, possession, imagination, dream, suggestion. Frank crosses them off one by one although he pauses a bit around possession discarding it only when he finds his old school bible and tries reading some Moses stuff out loud. It doesn't even make the air flicker. He checks Shirley's room - by unspoken mutual consent they'd lived in different parts of the house

since this began - and finds a head on a stick at the bed end. The stick is an old bamboo cane last used for tomatoes and you'd think the head would be too heavy for it but this one sits there, speared and wildly grinning. The cane goes in where the throat is and although this is very red there is no sign of running blood. Shirley has fixed it so it stares at her as she sleeps, or maybe the other way around. Whatever it is, they are set to watch each other. She's put an orange wig on it too. He slams the door and runs downstairs.

AT NIGHT HE CAN NO LONGER SLEEP. The air is thick enough to float on and his eyes scratch around their sockets. His shoulders are like thigh bones. The house creaks and rumbles. He can swear he hears voices. In Shirley's room when he goes to check it he finds a small pyramid of heads, maybe ten or so, stacked up on the dressing table and Shirley sitting cross-legged talking. Frank can't make out what she's saying he is too disturbed besides, he doesn't want to be seen. She might invite him in.

THROUGHOUT ALL THIS he has the feeling that his own head is getting bigger. His shirt collars won't do up. He gets headaches, like hacksaw blades. His neck aches and aches. He prowls around the house, avoiding everything, avoiding Shirley. She'd look at him if she'd got the chance, and smile. But they no longer speak.

ONE EVENING WHEN TV is showing a rerun of *Apocalypse Now* which Frank just can't face he makes the mistake of going into the dark middle-room. By common consent this had become Shirley's territory. At one stage she'd imagined that she could make headway as an artist and had bought an easel and paints and made that room a studio. Since then Frank had hardly bothered to go in. Shirley is in there, naked this time, sitting in a full lotus. Frank has always envied her ability to do this. The rest of the room is filled to the ceiling with a giant head. It has to be at least ten-foot across. So big you can see the individual pores, some of them with hawser-like hairs protruding. It has eyes like vast sinks and a nose which if it wasn't so frightening would be laughable for its size. There is no smell and no sign of any fluid other than the sweat on Shirley's back. She rocks rhythmically, her hand moving furiously between her legs.

HE DREAMS OF HEADS. What else is there? All the heads he'd come across in the house with Shirley had been male. The ones that move through his head now are women. Blondes with swirling tresses, redheads like fire. No breasts, no bodies, no legs - they excite him by the shape of their noses, the flex of their mouths, the napes of their tiny necks. A few wear bright lipstick. He likes those. He wakes with a firm, long-lived erection. It is his last. He goes to the bathroom and can't reach the taps. His arms no longer go over the sink edge. He tries to lift the toilet seat but can only get it halfway up. In the chrome strip that holds the bath surround together he glimpses himself. Short arms, short legs, puny chest. He moves in closer. He can see his face, unshaven, towering over his body. "You are a big head, Frank," he says to himself. "You always were."

IN BED HIS BODY has shrunk further. He tries "My head is my only house unless it rains" on his Blues Boy harmonica but he can't shift the notes. Can't do anything. He waves his arms in tiny circles, spits the Hohner out. Frank feels safe here with the sheet round him and no sight possible of his withered body. Fear runs through him like torrents. He feels for his penis, infinitesimally small now like a pedicle wart. His hand only reaches his nipple. He rolls and stares through the window. Blue sky, clouds. Shirley coming down the path with a bag on her arm. He tries to shout to her but all he gets is a croak.

IT IS DUSK WHEN she comes in the room. Frank's head lies on the pillow, he can feel his body like a ghost but it's gone. She's bouncy, whistling.

"Frank, where are you?"

She can do it. Shirley will help him. She's hunting the floor, when she gets up she spots him. Her hands are huge, fingers like legs. They swoop over and lift him, hold him like a bowler. Frank's head is smaller than a door knob. The room moves around him. It'll be okay. And she's shouting. The sound are enormous, the words impossible.

"Here, boy. Here."

And as the room tilts ever faster Frank sees the dog, black and leaping, jaws open. Frank spins, up through the air. He makes a terrible noise but no-one hears him. □

Buying Seed

Stella Nevil's garden is always the pride of Mogollón. The Nevils live on the shady side of the street, which shortens the season. Stella does not mind though. "Just as well," she says. "I grow plenty when I can. If it went on all year, I'd never get anything else done." That is not hard to believe. During the season, Stella is drawn to her garden like kids to a creek.

This year, Stella has a new terrace ready to plant. She says terraces are the way to go in Mogollón. She has a point. The cañon is only a hundred feet wide. By the time you leave room for Silver Creek, the road, and houses, level ground for a garden is at a premium. "Besides," Stella says, "I've got to have someplace to put all the rocks."

There is an endless supply of rocks. Perhaps the mountain grows them. More appear every time Stella turns the garden.

"That's another nice thing about a brand new terrace," she says. "No rocks. I'm going to grow carrots four feet long."

The only problem Stella has had has been in buying seeds.

"Thanks to the great economic recovery the government keeps shouting about, I can't afford my favorite catalogue seed any more," she explains. "I had to go to Silver City anyhow this spring. So I wanted to buy my seed there. I figured I'd get more variety and better prices. But do you think the garden spirits would go with me? Oh no, not them!"

"Bunch of cowardly spirits, that's what I say. It's not like I was asking them to go to El Paso with me or Albuquerque. It was just Silver City. They wouldn't go though, and that was that. I did pick up a few things there on my own. They didn't complain too much. I told them they had their chance."

"We compromised anyhow. Half a dozen of them did go down to Glenwood with me one time. They were a little nervous, but we visited a couple friends with gardens. The spirits had so much fun with the plants they finally relaxed completely. Gardens come in so much earlier down there."

You could be eating salads in Glenwood by the time I even see my garden through the snow.

"Just as well buying the seed in Glenwood, I suppose," Stella adds. "I like to buy locally anyhow."

Actually, the big news in Stella's garden is the kiwis. "They're supposed to grow anywhere," she says. "So I figured I'd give them a try. I don't know how long they'll take to produce, but I hope they do. They certainly are good."



Photo: Stephen Barnhill of Luna, New Mexico

Late Snow

We hear it is already just downright hot in El Paso. Phoenix doesn't even bear mentioning. However, as everyone in the mountains knows, only fools and newcomers predict the weather around here. It is probably a good thing the big storm blew in during the week. Could have been a real mess on the weekend.

Joe Malloney was sitting with the Nevils in the Bloated Goat Saloon, commiserating about the likelihood of damage to Stella's fruit trees and nursing a bottle of tequila. Stella had, of course, not set out any tomatoes. Squash was in the ground, but it was not up yet. There was not a thing anyone could do about the fruit.

All of a sudden, there was a commotion outside and a couple in their forties burst in, wild-eyed and frantic. Both of them were dressed head to toe in polyester and low-cut city shoes. It was hard to tell if they were shivering with cold or sheer terror. The snow was already nine inches deep and coming fast.

"How are we going to get out of here?" the man blurted out to the Bloated Goat in general.

"You stuck?" George asked. "We got a winch truck."

"Thank you, no," said the woman, who was slightly more rational than the man. "But I don't see how we can drive that frightful road."

"I do it all the time," said Joe. "I can

drive your car out, no problem."

Seeing no other alternative, they took him up on it.

Joe had already consumed the lion's share of the tequila. There was about half a pint left, which he polished off before going outside. The man and woman looked at one another and gulped.

"You sit in back for weight," said Joe. "We got a hundred yards to get a running start. We'll make it."

With the car good and warm, Joe gunned it. The car bobsledded around the curve out of town at sixty-five. It flew on up the hill and rounded the South Fork curve, clean as a whistle. It was still going fifty when Joe fishtailed up Deadwood curve.

"Stop!" gasped the man. "You'll kill us."

"Not now," said Joe. "We're home free."

The man wouldn't believe him. He grabbed for the wheel. Joe stopped the car, got out, and walked back to town. He was not even out of sight before the man had that shiny new Buick in the ditch trying to back down the hill.

Joe helped George and Stella chain up the winch truck.

It snowed clear through to morning. Then the sun came out, and everything was gone by noon. The creek came up about a foot. It did not freeze hard though. Stella thinks the fruit trees may be okay.

LAST DAY OF

0 only came back today, did I tell you that?
I've not had a chance to go through it myself before this.

1 Ah, here we go.
What? This looks like the view from my hotel room.
Yes, I remember, I took this one just to start the film off.
Actually, I didn't really expect it to come out. I didn't bother focusing
had to shoot through the window. Someone had
can you believe it? It probably
explosions that started off as fire.
Unless it's my reflection, I can't quite make it out. Can you? Quite a
weird effect, really.

2 This is better, no problem with the focus here.
I'd been for a walk where the carnival procession would go, trying to
decide on a good position. Anyway, I got to this little square outside
the church there — I didn't notice what it was called — and it was still
early so I thought I'd stop for a morning coffee at a pavement cafe.
Well, you know what it's like in these places, I was waiting for ages
and when the waiter finally did come he was very rude. I didn't want
to make a scene, but I did have to be quite firm with him. Would you
believe after all that the coffee was barely lukewarm.
I had just about decided that I wouldn't leave a tip when I looked up
and saw this character dressed like a devil going up the steps to the
church. A perfect image, you know, just the sort of picture that gets
you into the photography mags. So I whipped out the old camera.
Must have missed him, though. Can't figure where he could have got
to, I'd have sworn he was in the middle of the frame.

3 I took this one to set the scene. You know, atmospheric crowd shot
before the whole thing starts. It wasn't easy. I'd got there really early
I found this excellent position, a narrow alleyway off the main

THE CARNIVAL

36 EXPOSURES BY PAUL KINCAID

street that was so steep in places the road was actually steps. Anyway, at one point it looped back on itself and created this sort of balcony affair. You couldn't ask for a better position so I set myself up there.

Then other people started arriving. They've got no idea of the niceties, they were pushing and shoving and even though I'd been there long before anyone else it didn't seem to count for anything. The two people there in the centre, the one in the clown suit and the one dressed like a cardinal leaning against him, even tried to get me to drink from the bottle they were passing between themselves, but I had to refuse. I had no idea where it might have been.

4 Now this one ...
Hang on, let's go back a moment.

3 Yes, I thought so.
See that girl, right on the edge of the shot? The one in the white dress. I kept seeing her all day.

I hadn't realised she was in this picture, though.

4 There, now. That's where I thought I'd taken her for the first time. After all the jostling on that balcony I thought I'd try and find somewhere a little more congenial.

I'd started down the slope when I saw her and I just couldn't resist taking this shot.

I mean, that dress doesn't exactly leave a great deal to the imagination. And despite that funny silver and gold mask you can see enough to know she's really rather pretty. I don't think she realised I was taking her photo.

Even though she's looking straight into the camera it's more like she's staring at something behind me.

Do you know what I mean?

5 Oh yes, I'd forgotten this.

The main street was too crowded to be able to see anything, so I thought I'd go round by the back streets and get to a different part of the route. I had a street map with me, not that it was much good, I kept coming out in places a long way short of where I was supposed to be. But that's when I came across this scene.

I thought they were putting together floats for the parade, but I'm not so sure now since I never actually saw any of them in the procession. Still, I can't really think of much else it could be.

6 Nobody seemed to mind me being there, so I took quite a few shots. It's rather medieval, isn't it? What with all the braziers, and you wouldn't believe the noise. They seem to be incapable of doing anything without yelling about it all the time. But it's such a gritty, almost gruesome sort of scene. The carnival was supposed to have an Old Testament theme but honestly, some of the floats didn't bear any resemblance to any Bible story I know. I mean, that one on the left with the massive stones looks more like something out of Greek myth doesn't it?

7 Little bit of camera-shake on this one, I wondered if there might be. But you can make it out well enough, can't you?

The people in costume were getting into position on the float. It seemed a little early to me, there wasn't even a truck to pull the thing. Look, you can make out a couple of workmen still hammering away at that sort of Gothic shape at one end. Still, far be it from me to tell them their business. As you can see, they're all done up like cardinals and popes and what have you. I'd just got the camera focused when they turned to look at me. Every one of them, just like that.

Well, you can see the result. Really rather spooky, isn't it? Especially with those masks. I hadn't realised they were wearing masks up to that moment. Do you think they might not have wanted me to take

their picture? There was no sign or anything, and no-one had objected.

8 Now that's funny. By the church clock there it's nearly two o'clock. But I'd have sworn it couldn't have been more than a moment or two after the last lot I showed you, and that wasn't even midday.

See, after that last picture I felt a little unnerved, so I thought I'd have a beer. Just to get back on an even keel, you know. Well I went off down a side street and found myself back in the square where I'd had morning coffee. According to the map it shouldn't have been there, but that's what the maps are like over there.

I found a place at the same cafe and ordered a beer, then thought I'd just try a quick snap to show the crowd. Not a particularly good shot, though.

And it isn't helped by that damned mark again. Probably a flaw in the film or something. At least it's not on every shot, so I don't suppose it can be anything wrong with the lens.

9 Here's that girl again. I said she kept popping up.

I'd been about to take that couple in the rather fine harlequin costumes over by that tree, and suddenly the girl walks right into the middle of the shot. Just after I'd pressed the shutter she turned and looked right at me, like it was planned all along, you know.

Still, at least that mark's gone.

10 Let's see, this must have been mid-afternoon.

There's a few hours to go yet before the procession starts — most of that takes place after dark — but people are already in costume. I was beginning to feel quite out of place, and you know I'm not really one for all this dressing up lark.

Anyway, this was one shot I thought was quite amusing, the devil kissing that girl in the skeleton suit. There seemed to be an awful lot of devils at this carnival. And all sorts of churchmen as well, you know, monks and priests and that sort of thing. I'd expected something a little more colourful, but I suppose it is a religious festival.

11 Ah, now this is one I'm really quite proud of.

I was using the 200 mil. zoom, and I shot it at a 250th at f4. And look how it came out. Pin sharp, she is, hurrying across the square, with everyone else around her out of focus. That white dress must have been really filmy because there wasn't a breath of wind that day, but you can see it's like she's walking into a hurricane.

Rather sexy, really.

I mean, it doesn't leave a great deal to the imagination, does it?

Then it billows out like some sort of cloud behind her, almost ethereal, if you get my drift.

This would be a perfect shot if not for that smudge over on the left. You know, I've a good mind to complain to the manufacturers, there was obviously something wrong with that film when they sold it to me.

12 Oh, yes, this one. I'd almost forgotten.

I don't know if you could see it in that last shot but in the out-of-focus background ...

13 No, you can't really see it.

It's somewhere there, where the girl's coming away from.

12 Anyway, I noticed this commotion in the crowd. I couldn't make out what it was, but what I did was quickly refocus and take this one. Just on the off-chance, you know.

This is the first chance I've had to see what I got.

There, do you see, someone in a skeleton suit, a girl I think, lying on the pavement. There's a couple of people kneeling beside her, it looks sort of like they're delivering the last rites, but that's probably just because they happen to be dressed up as priests. She'd most likely fainted or was drunk or something. There was a lot of that during the carnival, I saw people keeling over all over the place.

Still, it does look rather macabre, doesn't it?

13 If I ever get round to putting names on any of these pictures, I'll probably call this one "The Convocation". Just look at that crowd.

There's some guy over on the edge in evening dress with a Zorro mask, and of course the one in the foreground who looks like he's running away is in a devil suit. But everyone else is done up in some sort of religious get-up or other.

Let's see, there's at least one pope, one, two ... four priests, a pair of nuns over there, a monk. Oh, and look at the guy at the back with the wings and halo and nightshirt — I hadn't noticed him before.

14 In contrast, this is probably the only honest-to-god religious outfit I saw all day. He's the local archbishop blessing the start of the parade. Nobody was paying him any mind. I suppose the whole thing had just started of its own accord hours before.

15 And that girl again.

I don't know why she keeps cropping up like this. I mean, it wasn't as if I was following her or anything.

Oh I suppose I was keeping an eye out for her. But not following her. No, I was just trying to keep up with the parade.

That's what I was there for, after all.

But it's not that big a town, at least the part of it where the carnival goes, so I suppose you are going to keep bumping into the same people.

Unless she was following me.

No, that's silly, isn't it.

But do you see her eyes? Oh, I know you can't really see them behind that fancy mask, but I kept imagining this wild sort of flash whenever she looked in my direction.

16 Now we get to the parade proper.

I'd found this really good position right on someone's front step. I felt a bit like an intruder, you know, only the crowd was getting anywhere

they could so it just seemed sort of natural.

Anyway, this was one of the first floats. I think it was meant to represent Sodom and Gomorrah, but they'd taken a sort of sidelong view, so what we get is like a Victorian Music Hall with the girls doing those high-kicking dances — they were rather good, too. And I thought those men in their capes and twirling moustaches were splendidly villainous.

17 And this one ... No it isn't.

What's happened here? I don't remember taking this picture.

It's obviously one of mine because you can make out that girl, though I don't remember seeing her again until after I'd got away from the parade. Is it ...?

0 No, the number's in sequence.

17 It was getting on for evening, so maybe I just didn't allow for the light. I must have been trying to take something in that dark patch right in the middle, but I got the exposure so wrong it's just black.

The only reason you can see the girl is because of her white dress, at the edge of the frame there.

Then there's that smudge again.

Have you noticed how it looks like a sort of hand? See, if you imagine that bit is the palm, then this is where the fingers are. Curling around, see, as if they're trying to grasp something.

18 That's funny, this is the float immediately after the music hall one. And the exposure's spot on.

It's not like me to get the exposure wrong, is it? I'm normally very careful about things like that.

And they did have pretty good lighting really along most of the route, so I was using long exposures and available light wherever possible because it gives that lovely warm yellow look. I suppose that other picture could have been someone else's that got mixed up with mine at the developers. Or do you think it might have been a fault on the camera? I suppose it could have got jarred while I was taking the lens cap off.

I don't remember it happening, though.

Anyway, this float was meant to be Lot's wife, I think. At least, that thing in the middle could be the pillar of salt. What I can't make out is all these characters in black round the edge of the float staring out at the crowd. I've no idea where they come into the story. Kind of creepy, if you ask me.

And can you make out the masks? Just like the ones I saw earlier in the day.

19 Ah, yes, I like this one. It's so wonderfully incongruous.

Tell you the truth, I felt I could do with another drink. Well, you get thirsty standing in a crowd, and it was a warm evening. There wasn't much point trying any of the bars near the route of the parade, so I headed down one of the side streets.

Then I came on this couple in a doorway. I don't think they noticed

even when I used a flash on them. I'm still not absolutely sure whether they were kissing or if it was some sort of fight, do you see what I mean? There was a moment when it looked really vicious. But I was just amused by the idea of this girl with wings in a clinch with some guy in horns. Have you noticed how they both seem to have oddly shaped mouths and elongated teeth?

I wonder if they're related.

20 I was rather lucky, actually, because that side street took me into one of the posher parts of the city and I found a bar which was really rather nice compared to a lot of the places you get down there. Very reasonable, too.

When I came out it was getting quite dark and the more glamorous parties had started. I took this to try and give an impression of what it was like. All the windows lit up and people out on the balconies.

But the noise, it was like they were all trying to outdo each other. You'd get jazz and rock and samba and all sorts of stuff mixed together. Down in the street it felt like the middle of a battle or something.

The picture's not really very successful, though, is it? The light seems to bleed out so you don't get a very good idea of shapes, and the exposure's all wrong. You should have been able to make out more of that doorway, for instance ...

Hang on, yes, there's someone there. Can you see?

It's not very clear because there should have been more light than that, but it looks like someone in a devil suit slumped there.

Probably dead drunk. You wouldn't believe the amount those people put away. You know they even let kids into the bars. Makes me really uncomfortable, that does.

Still, there'll have been a lot of sore heads the next morning, I can tell you.

21 This was one of the main public squares. It was just like Trafalgar Square at New Year, people dancing in fountains and passing bottles back and forth. Not really my idea of fun.

Still, it was a hot evening and seemed to be getting hotter all the time, so that water did look quite inviting. But I wasn't about to prance around like that, not in public. The party had obviously been going on like this for some time, though. I don't know if you can make them out but towards the other side of the square there were about half a dozen devils and three or four cardinals already out flat. The amount of public drunkenness was really quite reprehensible. But people were just stepping over the bodies as if they hadn't even noticed them.

Oh, and see that girl in the pink dress — rather pretty now I come to look at her — well just after I took this she came over to me with a bottle of champagne. I suspect she was already a little tiddy, at one point she stepped on one of the cardinals but I don't think either of them noticed. Anyway, she came up and offered me some of the champagne. Honestly, they were drinking straight out of the bottle.

And then she tried to kiss me as well. I had quite a difficult time disentangling myself.

22 Ah, my girl in white again. This was, oh, can't have been many minutes later.

It was just a little way down the street in another, smaller square. But the atmosphere was quite different. Not so raucous, if you know what I mean.

At first I felt much more relaxed here. Those steps she's on lead up to some elaborate looking building — you know how gaudy those places can be — and down below her everyone in the crowd seemed to be done up like an angel or a demon or that sort of thing. They were milling about so much you couldn't actually tell if they were fighting or dancing or what they were doing. Whatever it was, she was so engrossed in watching it I was able to get in really close with my zoom lens.

She's every bit as lovely as I'd imagined, almost too perfect. Yet that little mask makes it impossible to read her expression even this close.

And of course the smudge is back. I suppose I am going to have to complain to the film processing people, aren't I?

At least it's not so bad on this one, it just looks like there's something trying to get out from behind her mask.

23 And then she turned towards me.

I wish I'd had a video, you can't really get this on stills.

There was a movement, it's hard to describe, not quite a flinch, almost as if she'd felt me touch her. See how she was raising her hand to her cheek? All fanciful, of course.

She can't even have seen me. It was quite a long zoom and I was right over on the other side of the street. Not only that, but I was in shadow and she was standing directly under one of the spotlights they'd rigged up along the route of the procession. She can't have seen me. But I still had this strange impression she was looking straight at me.

An odd feeling, like a sort of prickling in the guts, rather scary in a way but kind of exciting too. It was like I really did want her to see me, but of course I didn't, not really.

Much better not to get involved, you know. You see things much better through the lens.

24 Oh, this was when I got knocked over. The camera must have gone off when I fell.

All those weird shapes would be legs and feet, except they're so out of focus they look like something else altogether. That was a really frightening moment because I didn't have any idea what was happening. I'd been concentrating on the woman so much I'd completely forgotten there was anyone else around at all. But all those people in the square must have surged up around me and the next thing I know I'm flat on my face and there's people tripping over me.

I'm sure it was completely accidental.

25 Somebody kicked the camera.

I was down on my hands and knees. Luckily my glasses didn't come off, but every time I tried to get at my camera there was someone in the way or I was being pushed to one side, or it got kicked a little

further away.

I thought I was going to lose it. But that big blur you see there right across half the frame, I reckon that's my hand just as I managed to grab it.

26 Of course, that's when the riot started. At least, I'm convinced that's what it was, though nobody else reported any violence. I was bruised and battered — you can still see a mark here under my ribs. I call it my war wound.

After I grabbed the camera, I just crawled between people's legs until I found a corner where it was fairly quiet. I sat there for a while to catch my breath, then I thought I'd try to get a picture to show what was going on. I've never seen anything like it before, I felt like a war correspondent.

It was rather exciting.

Everywhere I looked people were grappling with each other and punching and scratching. It was impossible to make sense of it, the whole square seemed to be filled with people and you could see sort of tidal movements. I'm not sure if that's the right way to describe it, there'd be a sudden sweep of figures in red coming from one side, or a line of white would cut right through the middle.

Anyway I thought, well you never know, if I got a good enough shot I might be able to flog it to a newspaper or something. I must have been more shaken than I realised, because you can't really make much out, can you?

Only that smudge again, like a hand reaching down from the sky over the crowd.

27 Hah, it did come out!

Look, if you want evidence, how about this?

I took it in one of the back streets just behind the square when I managed to get away. I know the light's bad, even with flash, so you can't make out all the details, or the colour.

Even so, you can see that's someone dressed as a devil and someone else done up as an angel, and they're lying there right in the middle of the road.

And what do you suppose that stuff is coming out of the corners of their mouths?

28 Well, after that I kept very much to the back streets to avoid people. My zoom lens had got damaged so I put it away in my bag and I was making my way back to the hotel because I'd had enough for one day.

But I must have taken a wrong turning. All of a sudden I was on a broad boulevard full of light and people, with the parade going on as if nothing had happened. So I took this picture just to show it was all right after all. I must have doubled right round to the front of the parade again, because it's that Sodom and Gomorrah float with the girls in those — what do you call them? Basques? — dancing with those Victorian gents.

29 Only this float wasn't back to normal, was it?

Look at that almighty fight between those demons and cardinals all

around that pillar of salt. I felt like I couldn't get away from it, like there was some immense battle going on all around me.

But nobody else seemed to see it.

That's a weird feeling, as if it's not real or you're going crazy, but I'll swear there was a bloody battle going on.

You can see it, for Christ's sake!

Yet the black figures in those horrible masks are just standing staring at the crowd as if nothing was happening. And ... oh God, are those masks?

30 And it's her again.

Why do I get this unpleasant feeling about the way she's always there when there's something happening?

I saw her in the front of the crowd, just watching the fight. I was quite some way from her so I could only get this partial profile. I would have liked to pull in tight on her face, but I'm actually rather glad I didn't.

All those people yelling and waving flags and throwing streamers and all the rest of it, really do set off how still her face is.

No expression, nothing you can read.

31 No, this shouldn't be a close up.

It couldn't be. I was too far away, there was no way I could get so near. I only had the normal 35 mil. lens.

She should be in long shot, like the last. She has to be.

It's like she knew I was there.

Of course there's no way she could have done, but she started turning towards me. There was a smile, so odd, so out of place, like she was only really beautiful when her face was still.

32 And she's looking straight at me.

There's no way her face could fill the frame like that.

I'd have to have been no more than a couple of feet away from her, and I wasn't. I was two or three hundred yards away.

I swear it.

And there's something so even, so unnatural about her features. But even this close you can't see her eyes behind that mask. Just that smudge. But it's not on the lens, is it?

It's in her eyes, coming out from behind the mask.

33 Yes, this was the next morning. Well, the early hours. Most of the parties were still going strong but the carnival procession itself was over.

Anyway, I came on these bodies. Back in that square, remember. Dead drunk, probably, though most of them look as if they really are dead.

You can even see what looks like blood spilled around those devils to the side there. Probably one of those atrocious foreign liqueurs they were all drinking, but it's like the aftermath of a war. Only nobody else seemed to notice.

I mean, how can you not notice something like that? I even went back later on my way to the airport, I only had about four hours sleep you know, and ...

34 No, the film didn't end there.

There were more shots.

It shouldn't be blank.

35 Wait a minute, there's that smudge again.

It must be a flaw in the emulsion. I ought to take the camera in and have somebody look at the lens, but it looks like something wrong with the film to me. I think I'll complain to the processors.

There shouldn't be these blanks, either. Curious how that smudge looks rather like a hand reaching out.

0 Best check the last shot while we're at it, I suppose. I'm really annoyed at the film running short like this.

I'll have something to say about that, I can tell you. Where is that last transparency? The film only came back today, did I tell you that?

I've not had a chance to go through it myself before this.

36 Ah

microne

r v b r a n h a m

It was raining when she wept, though if pressed on the matter she would concede it a mere coincidence between the fall of rain and the fall of her tears.

Later, when she slept, still the rain came. In sheets. In buckets. But not in cats, not in dogs. Inside, in her room (cold, but dry), she slept the sleep of the desperate. The deep sleep of the lonely. Of the innocent. Of the snorer. Of the damned. She slept, even when the rain ceased, packing up its clouds to catch the Trade Winds to the next Kingdom. She slept, even through the chirrupchirrup of her telephone's ringing. She slept until slapped in the face by the sun. It hurt. She slept more, yet remained inert. *Some* thing had happened. Not like an airline disaster on CNN. Something more personal. Something more important. Something had happened: to her.

Inventory ... No, not that. She could *feel* it, first in her fingernails and toenails. Hell, her fingernails *were* her toenails, and her toenails had become her fingernails. Odder yet, the toenails were not attached to her fingernails. Nothing that blatant. She could cope with finding her fingernails growing out of her toes and her toenails growing out of her fingers; it would be grotesque, a violation of the first commandment of her craft. She could not remember what that was, not just now, it faded into insignificance beside her more immediate problems, but she could remember the First Commandment, "form follows function." She could deal, could cope.

It was much more horrible than that. No, her toes weren't wiggling outward from her hands. Her fingers weren't arching from the front of each foot, eager to type an *étude* or play a memo. It went beyond nails and fingers and toes. Her ankles were now *wrists*. Her feet, her feet were hands. She had been turned upside down, cuticle by cuticle, follicle by follicle, organ by organ, limb by limb. And just what difference did it make?

Well, for one thing, she *knew* this had happened, not in some Pure Platonic Plane, but here, in this room, with the sun making her face hot. She started to move her head, to get out of the sun. She was stopped by the thought that this was not her face in the sun, but her pudendum, though it seemed somehow bare of hair, *shaved*. Had she been violated the night before, raped? Drugged with an aphrodisiac? She darted her tongue, but stopped: this was, after all, her clitoris. She cleared her throat – no, not throat, vagina. Spit dribbled from her lips.

As a test she looked down, and saw the pillow, at her knees, smudged with blood. This confirmed her worst suspicions. She was *upside down*, transmogrified molecule by molecule.

Either that, or she was having a pre-cognitive vision or an out-of-body experience, or had been murdered, and was leaving her body. These prospects were patently ludicrous.

Beyond the pillow, at the foot of the bed, was a settee. On the settee was a white lace gown,

orphosis

and what must have been a veil. It didn't look like her mother's, which she had always played with as a child whenever her parents were away.

Was it her older brother's?

Another disturbing fact registered itself: she was *not* seeing everything upside down. Which only served to deepen her suspicions.

She noticed an empty bottle of California pink champagne at the foot of the bed, between the mattress and the settee, jutting upward at a rude angle. She was reminded of the tail fin of a sinking automobile that had crashed through the bridge railing. Was there a 500-liter bottle lurking under the settee? A silly thought. Frivolous. Stupid. And quite irrelevant to her dilemma.

She heard a door open, but could not turn to look. Dared not. "Mi vida, mi amor," a cheery voice, concealing unfathomable depths of depravity, called out. "Sorry it took so long; he had a prolapsed valve – no other surgeons on hand – when they go into heart failure like that ..."

"Aha!" Or so she would have said. The gown belonged to him. He was a perverted mad doctor who had done terrible things to her while she slept.

"... Them's the breaks, I told you what you'd be in for if you got mixed up with a heart specialist."

She could see his shadow on the wall as he crossed the room. Her eyelids fluttered like Monarchs caught in a mist of insecticide.

"Jesus, you're getting a sunburn. Let me close the blinds." He was going to begin the experiments again, no doubt about it; he was going to create a race of upside downers.

And she was to be his Devo-Eve ...

It was dark. And it was cool again.

"I'm going to take a shower." She could hear him leave the room, she could hear him call out: "I was sweating like a pig in there – but I saved his life!"

Again he called out: "... Oh, I told room service to bring up more bottles of bubbly and paté. Make yourself decent before he gets here."

Decent? How? UPSIDE DOWN. Upside down in a rightside up world? Something scratched: chin or vulva. How could she itch it? Fingers or toes? Why try? Why not? Why not try both?

She heard what could have been rain on the roof. What could have been water in the shower stall in the next room. The room was cold but dry. She stared at the champagne bottle.

He sang that song from the opera: "TOREADOR! TOREADOR!" He sang it well. With perfect pitch. Sang it right. Side up.





The creature's ribs, half-buried by the tides, stuck out from the sand at odd angles, leg bones trapped beneath the torso. The head – four times the size of my own and, I'd dare say, more handsome – remained connected to the neck. Flesh covered the face, but could not hide the snarl of teeth, the cold stare of the vacant orbital. Quite a specimen from where I was standing, half up to my mug in sand and water on the East Shore. Soggy weather, with an early morning fog.

"Unique. Ugly. Dead," said my partner Devon, a tight-lipped man whose broad features suggested caricature. He stood seven feet tall. I had only worked with him a few times before, but he seemed dependable.

"All true," I said, "but none of it helpful."

We were there on the whim of a sharp-eyed wall patrolwoman. She'd spotted a "suspicious shape, a possible muttie." Never ones to skimp, the Conserge'd sent us.

Getting out of Veniss had been problematic, demonstrators surrounding the front portal as ever: doomsayers convinced that the city's growing isolation from other Earth enclaves and off-world colonies was directly related to the muttie expulsion and supposed "persecution" of the Funny People. Never mind that the Conserge continually changed the definition of "muttie" and "Funny" to fit their own political agenda.

"If ever there *were* a full-scale muttie invasion, why there we'd be,



DETECTIVES AND CADAVERS



***JEFF
VANDERMEER***

you and I, to shake their little paws and offer 'em tea," I'd said to Devon as we were finally flushed out of Veniss. I would have preferred a small army to deal with a possible muttie, but the Conserge had other priorities.

Devon wrapped his trench coat tighter around his frame.
"How should we go about reporting this?" he asked.

I took a quick glance back at Veniss before answering. Emulsifiers spewed green filth – the cost of our bioculture – across the walls, the fortifications, coated our poor defenseless defenders of city and Conserge. The flesh had awakened in Veniss. I could smell it even from here, the peculiar melange of heat and frustration which said *Too many people, too little room*.

"The Conserge is a strange lot," I said, from the strength of twenty years' experience, "Sometimes they can tell you what you're going to find before you find it, so be thorough. And start simple – *what* is it?"

Devon bent mechanically to his knees, to better examine the beast. His creakiness was, so he told me, the result of an accident. Funny People had assaulted him while he worked for the bioneers below level.

He looked up, smiled through crooked teeth. "It's mostly bone. I know a bioneer who could run tests for us."

I grunted, dug my hands into my pockets. "Could we call it Funny and leave it at that?"

Devon's face tightened. Now there was a bad move – bringing up Funny People – but how else could I phrase it? No matter what the scars, the poor bastard would have to grin and bear it.

"No," he said. "Not a Funny Person."

I had been pulled from my wife, Arcadia, and a warm bed for this assignment; I had a mind to rub it in, but time pressed. Behind me, the dirigibles had sounded their horns, cast moorings, and now hovered whale-like over the city as they policed it. Some carried floating gardens to an altitude above the miasma of pollution which choked the life out of Veniss.

Besides, after a moment's reflection, Funny People hardly seemed amusing. Arcadia and I wanted a child, but the bioneers had told us there was a good chance it would turn out Funny. A chief detective with a Funny Person for

a child? No future for the child, possible confinement. No promotion in one hundred years and "voluntary" sterilization for me.

"A muttie, then," I said. *That* word didn't raise his gander.

Devon got up. "I'll take the pictures. You decide what it is. It'll keep my mug out of the heat. Look to the horizon. My knees can't take bad weather."

Devon was right. The wind blew in bursts. Strange, crested waves of sargasso rolled in under a watery sun. If a bit of weed were the end of it, fine, but the sea had given us nasty surprises more than once. And, of course, the rain would soon be here, hindering communications and contaminated with flesh knew what. Arcadia would already be sealing the apartment, listening to the weather report on the split screen.

I had left her lying on the bed, her hair tangled in one upturned palm, her face turned away from me as she said, "How long?"

"I don't know. Muttie. East Shore."

There was a curious lilt to her voice as she said, "Afterwards, we could go out to Hospital Central for another checkup. You could ... I mean we could ..."

She trailed off, perhaps sensing the hurt in my rigid stance, belt taut in my hands.

"I'll be back as soon as I can," I had told her, sealing the promise with a kiss, taking the salty taste of her with me.

Devon took out the trusty v-c and started clicking stills. He carefully avoided touching the carcass. More tissue had survived on the beast than I'd thought: hair or fur clung to the earholes, the jawline. The underbelly appeared intact, though naturally I wasn't going to turn the stinking thing over to confirm – I'd get Devon to do it. Only, there was a problem with that description. The thing wasn't stinking. Which seemed strange. The water was full of chemicals which ordinarily broke down flesh within hours.

"Could this be another experiment gone bad?" I asked. "Some clever bioneer thought he'd violate the Prohibition and hide it in the sea."

Cases of unauthorized genetic experiments still made it into the books, even with both the bioneers and the Conserge determined to enforce regulation.

Devon shook his head. "No. Too sophisticated. They'd need at least six months in one

place. Someone would have caught them at it."

"Yes, well," I said, "we'll have to call it –"

That's when my day was spoiled for good. A moan cut the air, froze the freckles on my ears, dried the spit right out of my throat.

Devon chuckled in a way I found unnerving.

"Just the wind. Through its mouth."

The wind was brisk and, yes, it whistled through the beast's mouth.

"Oh," I said.

I covered my embarrassment by pretending a profound interest in the beast's nose. Nose? I stared into the eyes – the vertical pupils, the gold irises – and found myself lost, at sea. Was I an old fug or had only *one* eye been intact minutes before? Now I truly felt the wind lash my neck, recognized that the dawn was darkening, and the salt spray stinging.

"How clever," said Devon. "Very clever."

"What do you mean?" I knew what he meant.

"The flesh is reforming. Coming back to life."

Sweat beaded my forehead. I wanted to run – run and not look back. Arcadia awaited my return. For a moment, I had an image of her pure white skin, the liquid amber of her eyes, the way she could say a word, a phrase, and give it a meaning I had never thought of, and I almost lost my balance. This *thing* was big enough to rip us both apart and clean its teeth with a thigh bone.

"Does ... Does that mean it's muttie?" I think Devon enjoyed the fear in my voice.

He shrugged. "Not really. We should wait. See if it's a full regeneration or –"

"Or what?"

Devon smiled. "Or an involuntary reaction. The cells may grow back. The creature may then be intact but dead. We will need to observe ... for our report."

That rattled me. Devon telling *me* the rules. Yes, he was right: we were expendable, but the city's security was not.

"Okay," I said, "but if it starts to revive ..." I pulled out my laser-sight Diamond .38.

He nodded. "Fair enough."

We kept a strange vigil – like the parents who used to wait at Hospital Central to see if their child was normal or Funny.

I wondered if Devon had children. I had never asked, but I thought not; he was too impersonal, aloof. He click-clicked the v-c until I thought the lever would fall off.

Me, I tried not to watch as layers of flesh sprouted from the bone, as tendons and muscles began to fill in the gaps. The leer of teeth was soon covered. Organs ballooned inside the ribcage. What Arcadia would have made of it, I don't know. She might have laughed.

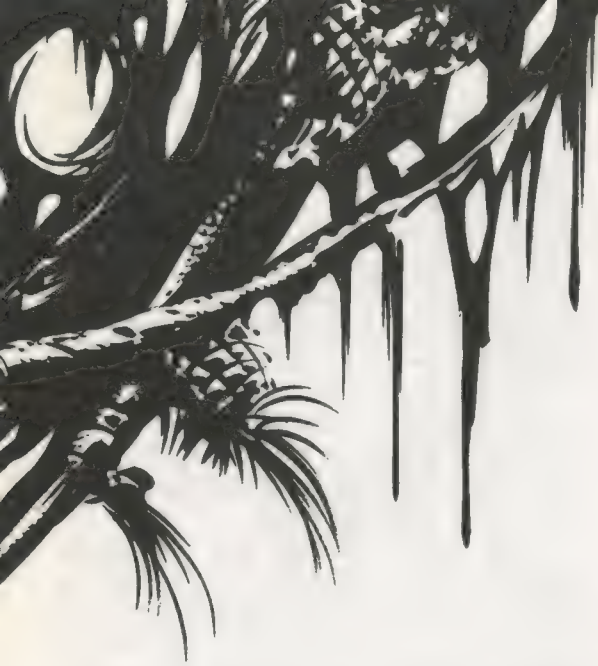
Devon had seen such things, of course, working as he had for the bioneers below level. He had even been to the fifteenth level.

So, I thought – about mutties, about Funny People. They were, as you might expect, much on my mind. Though I'd never told Devon, I had seen Funny People before – alive, not preserved in vat jars for school field trips.

I had been on the fifth level (considered marginally safe because bioneer apprentices live there) and had just finished taking the statement of a Mrs Jilla Collander about her missing husband. Missing! In a walled city. Surrounded by mutties and water. I wanted to say, "Where the fuck can he go, Mrs Collander?" Though there were at least two possibilities: that spies for the rogue bioneers in the wastes had taken him for the flesh – the city wasn't *that* secure – or he planned to create a new data file on himself and show up six months later, secure in a face-lift, with an obedient young blonde on his arm.

A step from the elevator and the promise of an early dinner with Arcadia – I had gone out and bought lilies, mushroom wine, the works – I heard a sound: like distant bells or chimes. It made me trip, bend my head, concentrate on the source. I walked until I could hear it clearly: a chorus of reed-thin voices that reminded me of whale-song, of wind through hollow glass. The holographic operas they put on to take your mind off the city's troubles couldn't compare. I had to find the source. I had to. There are so few things of beauty in Veniss.

The voices led me through progressively worse sections until even the overhead lights sputtered and shadows cringed away from me. Two green hand-held find flares bobbed and weaved down the corridor, but it was so dark I could not even see the faces behind the lights. Rancid water lapped at my boots. The smells of overheated plastic, machine oil, excretion, spices, liquor, and sweat all inundated me, but I clung to the sound like a drowning man. And it was difficult at times to follow the sound, to unwind it from the chugging air filters, the hissing oxygen pumps, the maniacal canned



laughter of split screens in the boxed-in tenements.

Finally, trudging through refuse from higher levels, I came to a corridor between two ramshackle single roofs. A flickering light above revealed neo-baroque representations of former Conserve members.

On the dusty floor, three children played coddleskatch to a nonsense rhyme. No, not just children. Funny People. Unlike most, two were flesh poor: just a head, neck, and an arm to pull them along. The third had two arms, but the welts and exposed tissue told me she (yes, she, with an angelic face) would be dead soon. All three must have required special gear. But still, there they were, playing coddleskatch after the fashion of children all over the city, moving from square to square with sidles and hops. The song? I remember only two verses. Nonsense, as I have said, but sung to perfection.

I-wire, I-wire
adders and ladders
detectives cadavers
it's really no fuss
to simply forget us

Psychewitch, psychewitch
eat your flesh sandwich
make us metal like you
swallow what we chew
flesh sandwich ...

When they stopped singing my shoulders sagged, as if their voices had supported my

weight, and they saw me. All three with their large, luminous eyes. Fearful. They must have thought I would arrest them, for they quickly gathered up their game and, hobbling along, disappeared into the gloom.

While I watched. The music gone. The corridor thick with dust and overlooked imperiously by the gargoyle likenesses of leaders long dead. Devon had lived in their world for six years – undercover, alone. I envied him.

The memory of the voices did not fade. Late at night as I lay beside Arcadia, the faces came to me in dream, the mouths like open wounds whispering, "Daddy ..." Sometimes I recoiled in disgust and sometimes I embraced them. Embraced them all, despite my revulsion.

I think it was then, in the aftermath of these nightmares that I truly understood the difference between Funny and muttie. The muttie had been fashioned to serve, to obey, and the master fears the servant. But the Funny was born of us and we tried to love it, no matter how staunchly we also hated it for reminding us of our own failures.

Arcadia had never once spoken of leaving me because of my deficiency. The question hung between us, never spoken, until finally it evaporated, had no power over us other than that a ghost wields, a memory which has never come to pass.

I would go to her at her ad job in the Canal District and we would walk home along the enclosed piers, amid the diaphanous glow of chemicals in the water, her hand in mine. Her grasp firm, without doubt, even when my eyes looked into hers and almost pleaded to be reminded, to be accused.

"My lover," she would say, and ruffle my hair because she knew I hated that. "My lover," she would say, and I would feel proud to be walking with her, amid the posh establishments of the Canal District, hand in hand, just walking.

Devon had spoken.
"What?"
He pointed to the beast. "Beautiful, isn't it?"

I stared at it. From outward appearances, it had fully regenerated: fur covered it, the claws

were wicked and long, and one fang peeked innocently from the mouth.

"Oh, yes, smashing," I said. "If you're a Funny Person."

Devon scowled. "This is clever bioneering. A muttie that dies before it lives. A creature born dead which then revives."

"A muttie?" My fingers tightened on the .38. My heart hammered in my chest. "I thought you said it probably was *not* a muttie?"

The creature's death rattle interrupted us: a groan of anguish that roared out, then diminished. The claws flexed. The eyes blinked. The head moved, the eyes tracking us as we backed away. I raised the Diamond .38 until the laser trace pulsed green on its forehead.

Devon knocked the .38 from my hand. I grunted in surprise. As it hit the sand, out of reach, I realized every word of his had been an attempt to stall until the beast could awaken. As I spun to face him, he kicked me in the stomach, then brought both hands down on the back of my head. There was a soft *crack* and pain seared my skull. I fell. I tried to get up, but slumped in the sand.

"You bastard!" I hissed, gulping for air. "You flesh-poor bastard!"

Now Devon was tearing the trench coat from his body, buttons popping loose in his eagerness to be free. When he had finished disrobing, I cursed myself for a fool.

Beneath the coat, a metal frame of gears and levers and wheels: living bone, tendon, sinew holding it together. A bioneer's wet dream. Within the organic wiring, the gimshaw circuitry, not Devon, not the seven foot Devon I knew. No. Two Devons, each identical, each the same three-odd feet tall. Each with extra limbs, external lungs, sprouting from the chests. The top one sat on the lower one's massive shoulders. The lower dwarf operated the legs. Funny People. Hysterical. A carnie show. I would have laughed if my head hadn't hurt so much. A marvel of coordination. How many bribes to keep their secret? How many corrupt bioneers? And, more important, how many Funny People had they saved from the Conserge? I heard the nonsense rhyme then, the children's voices. Mocking me.

Lithely, Top jumped from the frame, followed by Bottom. I don't know which disgusted me more. As I staggered to my feet, the empty frame

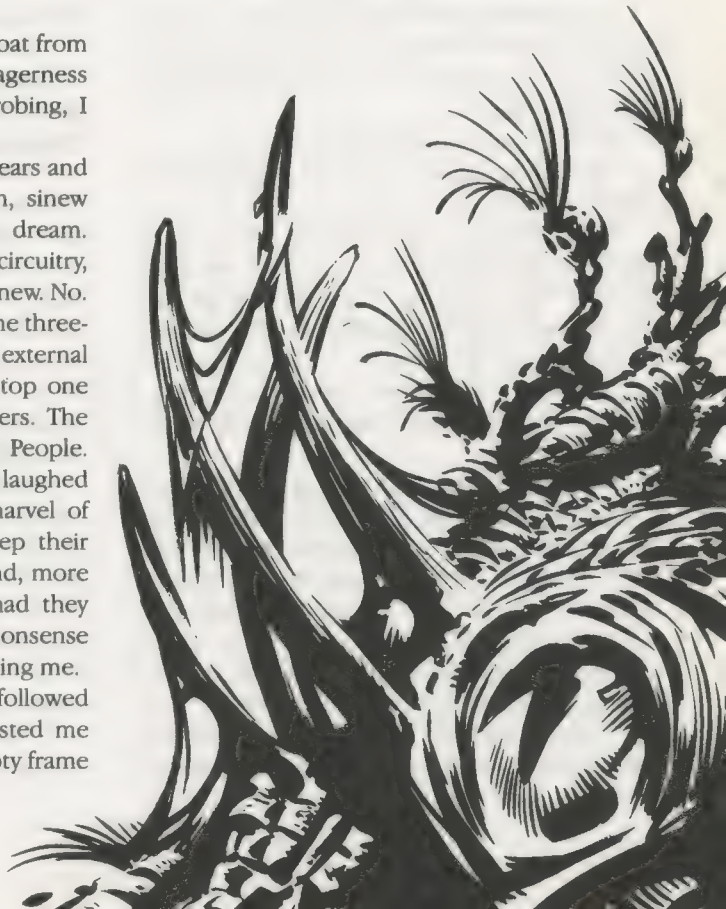
tottered, fell to the sand. The dirigibles hovered over the city, unaware of the danger beyond the walls.

The Devons hesitated and I saw the indecision on their faces. For a moment, I thought they might attack me, but then a grin cracked their mouths wide open, a grin that, perversely, made me grin back, it was so pure and spontaneous a reaction. Then, without a word, they began to run down the beach, away from the city, toward the wastelands.

Me, I wanted to find my Diamond .38, but something growled and swiped out at my legs. The muttie had slipped my mind in the wake of the twins' striptease. Claws locked around my left ankle. Again I fell. I scrabbled at the sand and kicked out, hoping to break a tooth or two before it swallowed me whole. My hand met something solid: the .38. I raised it. I fired. The muttie screamed as I severed its arm at the elbow. I kicked once more and was free. The severed claw-hand still clutched my ankle. I tore it loose, threw it away. I looked to see how far the Devon marvels had gotten.

Too far to kill, or even maim.

"You flesh-poor *bastards!*" I screamed, nothing if not original.



No answer, of course. No answer at all, just Devon times two bobbing up and down, dancing along a shore under siege of rain.

Behind me, the muttie hunched closer. I turned, fired. Blood spattered everywhere. Fired. Fired again.

The golden eyes looked up at me, still bright. "Mann ..."

Speech? Stunned, I fired a fourth time. More blood. I had opened a major artery. I was crying now. It/he was *talking*.

"Mannn ..." Plaintive. "Mann?"

I drilled it between the eyes. It groaned. It struggled to its feet, fell sideways, fur matted with blood. "Mann ..." And the death rattle again.

The storm was coming in quick, the wind rising, lightning in sheets of silver. The Devons were shadows in the spreading darkness. Soon they would be beyond even the range of the dirigibles. How the lower one must have sneered, held back giggles at my stupidity.

"**M**ann ..." The reverse death rattle. I turned in surprise. How to kill that which lives and lives again?

"Why?" I screamed. I kicked it. "Why?"

I will never know what the creature really said. Its mouth was full of blood, its pronunciation already garbled. I suppose I heard what I expected to hear.

"I-wire, I-wire, adders and ladders ..."

Like a message in code, and I without the skills to solve it.

Blood sang in my arteries, the storm's electricity lifting the hairs on my arms. My job – my life – was to uphold the law of Conserge, but the Conserge had never told me that mutties could speak, could think.

The beast raised its head, eyes fixed on me.

"You killll," it stated or asked. "You killll Funnnyyy."

I thought of the three children playing coddleskatch. I thought of Arcadia's hair tangled in one upturned palm. "*Afterwards, we could go out to Hospital Central for another checkup ...*" My hands were cold on the trigger. "... *You could ... I mean we could ...*"

"Weee makkk," it said. "Wee makkk you ..." Struggling to speak, perhaps to explain.

This time I kept on firing, cutting the legs out from under it, quartering its head, knowing as I

did so I could not kill it. As the beam sawed splinters out of the bone, its voice rose in an agonized scream to match the hysterics of the storm, a deafening wall of sound which left me trembling and weeping. I crouched to one knee, breathing hard.

A wail of sirens from Veniss warned of rough weather as the dirigibles wallowed in troughs of calm air and indifference. If the Conserge fell, the children I had seen, who came to me in sleep, would not be Funny. I would be Funny. Arcadia would be Funny. In my mind, the children sought the embrace of my arms, as if I could save them. But I could not move.

It was then, with the rain moving in, the thunder and lightning, that I realized how truly and deeply I loved Arcadia. I loved her with a purity which surprised me. I could not sacrifice her safety, not for the children singing in the alley, not for the beast on the shore. Flesh preserve me, I would have betrayed the city and its tick-silly Conserge in that moment – but only for love of her. Funny People be damned. Devons be damned. Damn the lot of them. I would return to Veniss and report this new muttie to them. And the Devons. I would not allow them to slouch closer to the city, to harm its citizens, no matter how undeserving those citizens might be.

But when I took one last look out to sea, I realized the choice was not mine to make. And I knew why the Devons had abandoned their disguise with such defiance.

There, in the surf, not waves, but corpses. Thousands of skeletons churning water to foam as they made landfall. As if every muttie we had ever mistreated, tortured, murdered, had come back from the grave. Some were huge, larger than a dirigible, others like small fish. All with one eye intact to guide them, vertical pupils amid the gold. It seemed the water had evaporated – just skeletons clattering against one another, chattering in wind-spray. Piling up.

I went a speck mad then. I laughed a dry, hacking laugh. Turning, I ran, but at my back was that terrible vision which told me the Conserge had failed, that I had failed: the corpses piling up, returning to life. The sound they made took the form of bone-thin voices in the waves, voices in my mind, "detectives cadavers, detectives cadavers."

How now to save this city for us funny people? □

BBR Review

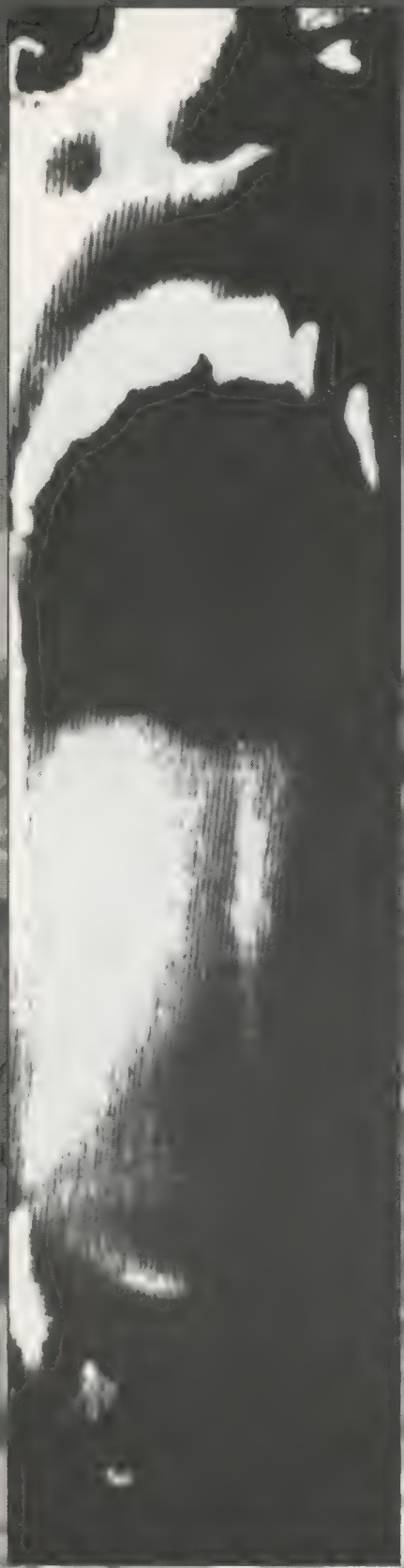


Inside

Prague: the new Left Bank? – *plus fiction by Michal Ajvaz*

Chamberlin interviewed – *what makes the C-Boy tick?*

Letters – *feedback, opinions and comment*



Adverts and graphics from Yazzyk magazine

With the cultural spotlight firmly on Prague, Cyril Simsa gives us an insider's view of what's really going on – the literary agenda and the new names to look for.

Prague

with Fingers of Rain

One of the recurrent themes of Czech life in the last five years has been the gradual rediscovery of all those aspects of their cultural and political history which the Communists tried to suppress. In politics, much is made of the renewal of pre-War democratic traditions and the political legacy of the Czechoslovak First Republic (1918–1938) which, certainly towards the end of its existence, was remarkable for being the only surviving liberal democracy in Central Europe. In the visual arts there has been enormous interest in the work of the Czech modernist painters and the avant-garde cultural reviews like *Devětsil* (the house journal of Czech surrealism), second-hand copies of which go for not much less than a whole month's salary per volume.

In literature, however, the focus seems to be shifting increasingly towards the generation of Czech writers who became active in the 1890s, and thus laid the foundations for the cultural life of the First Republic, as well as towards the literatures of the German and Jewish minorities, whose very existence became a controversial subject after the political disasters of the Second World War (the Jews having been all but exterminated, and the Germans having been forcibly deported by the Allies when the War ended).

Now, suddenly, these forbidden literatures are back on the agenda, and it is interesting that this is one of the areas where the process of discovery cuts across

linguistic barriers, with both Czech and American publishers getting in on the act. More generally, though, it is possible to see that there are a lot of parallels between the ferment of cultural change which swept through Czech culture in the 1890s, and the kind of adjustments which are happening today, especially among the young. The 1890s were also a period of reaction against the cultural conservatism of an essentially repressive and illiberal political regime whose authority had crumbled (in this case Austria-Hungary, rather than Communism). They were a period when, like today, Czech culture opened itself up to the outside world, in an effort to catch up with the cultural developments which had passed it by in its years of isolation, and if the predominant outside influence today is American, rather than French, the inflammatory nature of the material which is most talked about remains the same.

With the influx of foreigners, Prague is also slowly regaining its original multiculturalism, with Americans now replacing the Germans as the most visible linguistic minority, and Chinese and Vietnamese traders taking the place of the Jewish shopkeepers. More superficial similarities in the growth of conditions which support a bohemian lifestyle are perhaps so evident that they don't need further comment: the enormous proliferation of bars and cafeterias, where the

underemployed of all ethnicities sit side by side leafing through *The Prague Post* or the Czech alternative press; the huge number of seedy music venues and nightclubs; the liberalisation of sexual mores; the flirtation with absinthe and mind-altering drugs.

Reading the memoirs of the Czech decadent Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic (1871–1951), recently published by Thyrus (a new imprint dedicated to documenting the literature of the 1890s), it is hard not to see parallels. Karásek was one of the prime movers of the Czech avant-garde in the 1890s. Co-founder of *Moderní revue* [*The Modern Review*, 1894–1925], and a prolific critic, he achieved early notoriety when his second collection of poems *Sodoma* [*Sodom*, 1895] was confiscated by the Austro-Hungarian authorities for its homoerotic content.

Karásek's memoirs of the 1890s are a fascinating document of their time, full of long nights spent reading foreign literary reviews in late-night coffee-shops, night-time rambles around the streets of Prague, and his vitriolic literary squabbles. He continued to be a significant figure in Czech literature right up to the start of the Second World War, but his fortunes suffered a long eclipse under Communism. Now, he is beginning to be reissued.

Gustav Meyrink (1868–1932), the German-speaking author of a whole series of occult novels set in Prague, is another writer who fared very poorly under Communism. Although he was himself forced to leave Prague in 1904 after a series of financial scandals, the city remained a major motif in his writing for the rest of his life, and he captures the mysterious courtyards of the Malá Strana district beneath the castle with an almost visionary clarity. It is hard to be sure exactly what it was that bothered the Communists so much about his works: the occult trappings, the social satire, the fact that he belonged to the German minority, his unrepentant mysticism, or perhaps it was a combination of all four. In any event, only *The Golem* and a short selection of his stories ever saw print during the Communism interregnum, but now he is sold everywhere, both in Czech and in German, and even his most obscure stories seem to have been made available in cheap Czech paperback editions.

These reissues of Karásek and Meyrink are not just a matter of historical curiosity. Both authors are key figures in the unwritten cultural history of Prague at

the turn of the century, and both, moreover, address topics which are once again of crucial interest. Echoes of their work are evident in many aspects of contemporary Prague: Karásek has been adopted by the newly-revived Gay Rights movement (who have proudly claimed him as one of their own), as well as by literary publishers intent on re-establishing a living relationship with the aesthetic and social ferment of the 1890s, while Meyrink's unique talent for lifting the veil on the secret history of Prague is reflected in the work of the brilliant Czech literary fantasist Michal Ajvaz [b.1949], whose recent novel, *Drubé město* [*The Other City*, 1993], describes how a mysterious "other" city begins to intertwine itself with the real historic centre of Prague.

A number of other key writers, who were neglected under Communism, have also become at least cult figures in the years after the revolution. Another contemporary of Meyrink, the Prague German writer, Paul Leppin (1878–1945), made his debut in Czech in 1992 with *Severins Gang in die Finsternis* [*Severin's Journey into the Dark*, 1914], a fine impressionistic novel in which the bemused hero staggers dazedly around the periphery of Prague society, having strange encounters with femmes fatales, Russian anarchists and perfidious occultists whilst sinking ever deeper into his own confusion. Leppin's earlier novel, *Daniel Jesus* [1905], about a repulsive rich hunchback who gets his kicks out of degrading people, was translated into Czech a year later.


The importance of this process of historical revisionism has not gone unnoticed in the more perspicacious quarters of the American community in Prague, and it is interesting to note that the two most promising émigré publishers have both contributed to making these authors available in English. *Yazzyk* magazine (by far the best of the local English-language periodicals) deserves special note for the fact that it published two stories by Ajvaz in its first issue (1992), a year before he drew attention to himself with his ground-breaking novel. Since then it has gone on to publish a special feature on the eccentric occult philosopher and fantasist, Ladislav Klíma (1878–1928), as well as more material by Ajvaz (issue 3, 1994), while issue 2 (1993) presented a selection of material on questions of

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sexuality and gender by Czech and American writers, including illustrations and texts by some of the Czech surrealists.

Twisted Spoon Press, unlike Yazyk, has specialised in publishing English-language paperbacks, including two books by the young Czech émigré writer, Lukáš Tomin, and a number of translations. Perhaps the most significant of their books so far is the first English edition of *Severin's Journey into the Dark*, in an extremely readable translation by Kevin Blahut (1993). Twisted Spoon Press have also started to lay the foundations for a reconsideration of the significance of Franz Kafka, by issuing the first complete translation of *Contemplation*, Kafka's own selection of his early stories (originally published under the title *Betrachtung* in 1913), and supplemented in the English translation by four further stories which saw publication in Kafka's own lifetime. As their next publication, Twisted Spoon are planning a collection of Leppin's short stories, which should be out by the end of the year.

Czech publishers have been so overwhelmed by the rush to document the past that it is hard to tell where the new stars of the next century are going to be coming from. Even when confronted by what is apparently a new book, one is always aware that, on closer inspection, it may turn out to be a fifteen-year-old manuscript which was unable to find a publisher under Communism. This makes it especially difficult to judge what, if anything, is genuinely new, and what has just been resurrected.

One of the few Czech writers who has managed to build up both a critical reputation and a popular following on the basis of works which clearly are new is Michal Viewegh (b.1962). So far he has published two satirical novels, a book of parodies, and a huge number of shorter pieces in the daily press. The real key to his success, though, is the fact that he combines a sharp wit and acute observation with an extremely readable, intelligent style. This is perhaps best demonstrated in *Nápady laskavého čtenáře* [*Thoughts of a Gentle Reader*, 1993], his book of parodies, which viciously lampoons a whole range of modern writers with unerring accuracy.

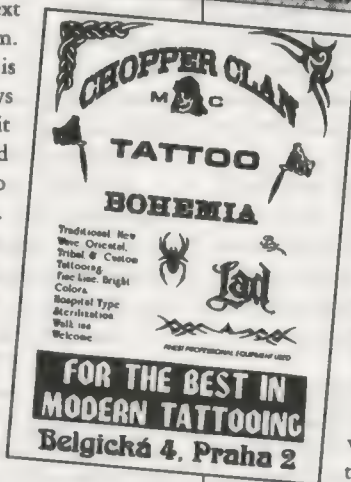
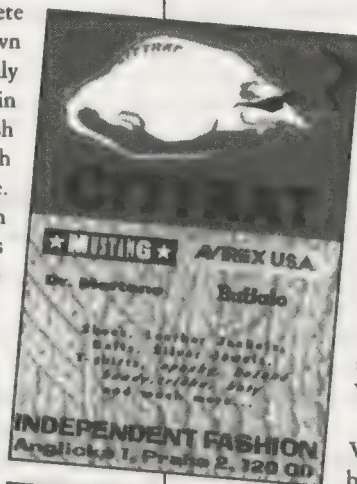
It's too early yet to tell whether Viewegh will develop, with age, into a media satirist and newspaper

columnist, or whether he will press on with his evident ambition to be an acerbic social novelist. In either event, though, English translations of his work have been prepared for the *Serpent's Tail* anthology, *This Side of Reality* (ed. Alexandra Büchler), and I believe that more are in the pipeline.

The Czech SF genre is another field which has been through dramatic changes in the five years since the fall of Communism. During the 1980s, there was a real sense in which SF was one of the few literary forms that allowed writers to say things about Czech society that they couldn't say elsewhere. Now that people can express themselves freely, however, writers who want to write social commentary simply do so somewhere else. One of the side effects has been that the writers who are still active in the field have a much stronger interest in the SF and fantasy genres as such, and they are gradually shaping them into something very closely resembling Western publishing categories.

This is certainly the case with Vilma Kadlečková (b.1971), the biggest new star of recent years, who writes intelligent genre fantasy without any obvious social or political sub-texts (readers may remember her story from *Interzone*). At the other end of the genre spectrum, Ondřej Neff, probably the most important figure in Czech SF during the 1980s, is concentrating on solidly researched, extrapolative space fiction. Both writers are extremely good in their chosen fields, but there can be little doubt that Czech SF as a whole has lost a lot of what made it so specific in the 1980s.

A good example of an SF writer who has moved on is Eva Hauser. Towards the end of the 1980s, Hauser was one of the most prolific and distinctive voices in Czech SF (her award-winning novelette, "U nás v Agónii" ["We, in Agony", 1988], remains one of the finest Czech SF stories of the period). Although she has published two SF books since the revolution and worked for a time as assistant editor of the Czech SF monthly, *Ikarie*, her greatest success as a writer has come with the publication of *Na koštěti se dá i létat aneb Nemožné ženy dokážou i nemožné* [*Broomsticks Can Also Be Used for Flying, or Impossible Women Can Achieve Impossible Things*, 1995], a wide-ranging collection of her feminist essays. Apart from attracting



favourable attention from a broad spectrum of the Czech media (including radio and television and at least one professional sociology journal), this book has sold four times as many copies as Hauser's earlier feminist SF novel, *Cvokyně* [*The Madwoman*, 1992]. Hauser is now a frequent contributor of articles to both the alternative and the mainstream press, specialising in the environment and gender issues, and in her day job she works as a translator. Little wonder, then, that her future plans are centred on her feminism and her translations, with fiction being relegated to a poor third.

Hauser is by no means the only SF writer who has

taken this path. Ondřej Neff also spent the first four years after the revolution working as a professional journalist, and only recently returned to writing fiction. Others have joined the press corps and never come back.

One of the most interesting aspects of Czech publishing in recent years is the continued existence of the alternative press, even after political change has swept away many of the restrictions which led to the creation of the underground press in the first place. A lot has been written about samizdat and its

A lot has been written about Prague being the Paris of the 1990s. The little clusters of American bars and bookshops (Velryba in Prague 1 and The Globe in Prague 7 seem to be particular favourites) are compared to the bars and bookshops of the Paris Left Bank, while the happy American revellers quaffing cheap Pilsner beer and nasty un-American spirits like juniper vodka and Becherovka herb liqueur, are compared to the Parisian demi-monde of the 1930s.

It's certainly true that Prague has seen what is probably the biggest influx of young American travellers to any Continental European city for many decades, and it is also true that a large fraction of these Americans seem to have put down roots here, and that (barring pogroms, nuclear catastrophe, or the entry of the Czech Republic into the European Union) they seem likely to stay. The cost of living is still relatively cheap (though rising), drug and alcohol laws are lax, and the city is spectacularly beautiful: anyone with even the bare remnants of a hard currency bank account, and the bare minimum of their wits about them, can have a very good time here.

It's also true that the American community here has created its own meeting places, its own media and even its own literary magazines – and that an almost unacceptable number of them harbour secret (or even not so secret) literary ambitions. This, however, is more or less where the parallel with the Paris of the 1930s finishes, and those commentators who try to force the current Prague scene into a straightjacket of heavy-handed historical comparisons are actually missing a great deal that is both interesting and culturally specific to the present.

For starters, it's not just the American expatriates who determine the cultural shape of contemporary Prague (indeed, it is rather arrogant of the predominantly American commentators who wheel out the Left Bank hypothesis to assume that it is they

Hemingway

who give the cultural shape to Prague and not the other way round). The broader cultural and historical context in which the Prague expatriates are living is quite different from that of Paris in the 1930s, and the social transformation which they are witnessing is quite unparalleled. The wholesale disassembly of a culturally repressive, bureaucratic, totalitarian, socialist system into a culturally permissive, bureaucratic, post-modern capitalist one bears no relation to the events which shaped the era of Gertrude Stein.

Secondly, though, and perhaps just as importantly, the American literary scene here does not have a credible focus. Although it has its own weekly newspaper, two literary magazines, several publishers, and innumerable bars, it does not as yet – in Bruce Sterling's memorable phrase – have an André Breton. (One wonders, if it did, whether anyone would bother to listen to him, given that we are now living in an age of cultural relativism, MTV and Umberto Eco, but the point is well made: there is no trace of the Messianic conviction or the sense of one's own cultural importance which accompanied the creation of Parisian modernism: there is no unifying vision, no spiritual leader; there are no underlying or competing ideologies which would somehow illuminate and contextualise the whole.)

Here in Prague, everyone gets on with his or her own various literary projects, occasionally they may even get something published, but no-one has yet succeeded in creating anything which would address the audience back home. No-one has attracted the attention of the heavyweight critical journals in the way that Hemingway or Stein or

function, but nobody, however, seems very interested in exploring what is offered by the alternative press today.

Obviously, the function of the alternative press in a liberal democracy is not the same as under Communism, and, as in the case of the SF genre, the definition of what constitutes an "alternative" has shifted towards the Western norm. Nonetheless, there is a certain continuity between the 1980s and the present day. Indeed, both *Vokno* [Window] and *Revolver Revue*, the two titles that have dominated the alternative press since 1990, are continuations of samizdat journals that started publication in the 1980s.

Now, for the first time, there has been an attempt

to launch a major new counter-culture magazine which has no roots in the dissident past. Its title is *Živel* [Element], and it's being edited as a sideline by Ivan Adamovič of *Ikarie* magazine, together with a group of young computer-culture enthusiasts from Brno. The stand-out item in the first issue was a long interview with Bruce Sterling, conducted by the editors while Sterling was in Prague. There are also special features on smart drugs, the comic-book artist John Willie, and stories by Rudy Rucker and the youngest generation of local cyberpunks. Future issues will include material on computer modelling, altered states of consciousness, slipstream, and shamanism, plus

& Company

Djuna Barnes at one time succeeded in doing. No-one is publishing stuff in Prague which they would be unable to get published elsewhere for fear of censorship.

One also gets the feeling that there are far fewer contacts between the American community in Prague and local writers than was ever the case in Paris – or, at least, that these contacts are of less importance. In part this is undoubtedly because the Czech language is much more difficult than French, and fewer people arrive here with even the rudiments of a Czech vocabulary. In part, though, I suspect it is also because there is less interest (on both sides) than there was during the '30s. Whereas in Paris, all writers of note – both French and American – were in the grip of modernism, the problems with which Czech writers are now grappling (post-communism, the de-Stalinsation of culture, the rediscovery of their own traditions) are quite different from the problems which interest the current legion of wannabe Hemingways (sexual politics, MTV, magic realism).

Very few of the American writers in Prague are really making any serious effort to come to terms with the legacy of Czech culture, but somehow they expect the Czechs to be familiar with all things American. (One of the American literary magazines here, *Trafika*, is notable for the fact that it uses almost no contributions by Czech writers – or, to do them justice, by local American expatriates – and instead fills its pages with stories by people like Don DeLillo and Garry Kilworth. Well, fair enough, if that's what they want to do, but why come to Prague to do it?)

It is too early yet to tell what role the American émigré community is going to find for itself in the longer term. Assuming that they stick around, however, one assumes that they will eventually find a niche, not only in the literature of their country of origin, but also, more specifically, in the literature of their adopted home. The key to what they will be doing here, though, lies in Prague and in the specific history of the Central European region, and not in the antics of the American émigré community of Paris in the 1930s.

Prague has a long history of absorbing groups of different ethnicities and, up to the Second World War, it rarely had fewer than three parallel literatures running alongside each other, each in its own language. There isn't any reason to suppose that it has lost this power today.

Indeed, a closer look at the historical record reveals that the present generation of Americans in Prague aren't the first. Czechoslovakia in the '20s and '30s also had a community of British and American writers living in the city, and it even had its own English-language news magazine, published weekly in Prague, which contained a digest of Central European news, occasional travel pieces and reviews of Czechoslovak culture (a lot like *The Prague Post*, in fact). It was called *The Central European Observer*, and many of its contributors (such as Henry Baerlein, Paul Selver and Dora Round) were quite famous in their day, publishing books both in Prague and in their countries of origin.

Who knows what might have become of this generation, if they hadn't had to flee the Nazis? Who knows how we would regard the Americans in Prague if we weren't still having to interpret them through the selective amnesia of forty years of Communism?

Certainly not as a gaggle of wannabe Hemingways.

Cyril Sims

stories by John Shirley. In other words, if *Vokno* is the *Re/Search* of the Czech alternative press, *Živel* wants to be *Mondo 2000*.

What is perhaps most striking about *Živel* at first sight is the computer-aided graphics, which go way beyond anything that has ever been attempted by a Czech publication before; however, the content is also solid, and backs up the flashy visuals with an intelligent selection of off-beat (and certainly, for Prague, well-out-on-the-edge) material. If the first issue is successful, it should become a regular publication.

Another interesting project from the Adamovič stable is a series of up-market SF, fantasy and horror books, which he is preparing for a local publisher called *Najáda*. Already scheduled are the first Czech edition of *The Abubis Gates* by Tim Powers, and a Czech translation of *The Brigade*, John Shirley's brilliant study of the psychology of power.

Books being one of those things which generally take so long to ferment in the writer's imagination, it's probably too early to look for anything like the quintessential novel of 1990s Prague. Films are a more immediate medium, though, and the last two years have seen a number of attempts by Czech film makers to depict the changes of the 1990s. Curiously, most of them chose to do this by using the form of an imported cinematic genre which has no tradition in the Czech cinema.

The most recent of these attempts at time of writing is *Válka barev* [*The War of the Colours*, dir. Filip Renč, 1995], a not altogether satisfactory thriller about a photographer who witnesses what appears to be a murder whilst out on a location shoot (the reference to *Blow Up* is deliberate).

Unfortunately, Renč's villains are not the down at heel property developers and corrupt trade union officials that give *Heatwave* so much of its matter-of-fact menace. Instead, he fills his film with grotesquely exaggerated comic-book Russian Mafiosi, who keep growling black panthers in their villas instead of guard dogs, and can be distinguished, even in long shot, by their bizarre metal prostheses. (Must be evil if they don't look right. Right?) Renč's obsession with fast cars, microlights and the zen-like qualities of paint-ball (sic!) also sit uneasily in a social setting where much of the population still drives Trabants.

What is genuinely interesting about the film, though, is its depiction of Prague nightlife, and especially its raver's-eye-view of early morning Prague. Even if the atmosphere of these passages is somewhat reminiscent of the early-morning scenes in *Diva*, Renč seems to have a real talent for picking out offbeat locations, and his picture of Prague is quite unlike anyone else's. Renč is also excellent at capturing the light-headed feeling that comes with staying up all night and

the intoxicating sense of having the empty city streets all to oneself. If only his portrayal of character were as uncliché as his picture of Prague, perhaps he could have had the makings of a truly original film.

Rather more successful than *Válka barev*, though technically not about Prague at all, is *Jízda* [*The Ride*, dir. Jan Svěrák, 1994]. This is something of an exercise in minimalist film making, shot in three weeks flat in the summer of 1994 on a budget of 1 million Czech crowns (less than £24,000), and already in the cinemas in October. It tells the story of two young men from Prague who buy a cheap car from a scrapyard, cut off the roof to turn it into a convertible, and head down south for a holiday. On the way, they pick up a young woman hitchhiker who is running away from her abusive boyfriend, smoke some dope, break into a holiday cottage, smoke more dope, indulge in long, stoned conversations about nothing much, and smoke more dope. Needless to say, it all ends tragically, but along the way the actors improvise a whole series of scenes which are alternately hilarious and touching, and there is a great deal of that peculiarly stoned sense of humour which anyone who has ever experienced it never quite forgets.

Something about the film – perhaps the humour, perhaps the novelty of seeing an authentic Czech road movie – struck a chord with Czech audiences, and the film ended up being one of the surprise hits of 1994. A version with English subtitles also turns up in Prague occasionally. See it if you can: nothing else captures the current mood of young people in the Czech Republic as well as this. □

FURTHER READING

Vilma Kadlečková, "The Goods", *Interzone* 91, Jan. 1995

Franz Kafka, *Contemplation and Other Stories*, Twisted Spoon Press, 1992 (PO Box 21, Preslova 12, 150 21 Prague 5, Czech Republic).

Jiří Karásek ze Lvovic, "The Meeting", *Fantasy & Terror* 14, 1992.

—, "Salome's Death (A Nubian Apocryphon)", *Fantasy Macabre* 16, 1994 (both available from Richard H. Fawcett, 61 Teecomwas Drive, Uncasville, CT 06832, USA).

Paul Leppin, *Severin's Journey into the Dark*, Twisted Spoon Press, 1993 (address as Kafka).

Gustav Meyrink, *The Golem*, Dedalus/Ariadne, 1985.

—, *The Opal and Other Stories*, Dedalus/Ariadne, 1994.

—, *Walpurgisnacht*, Dedalus/Ariadne, 1993 (Dedalus Ltd, Langford Lodge, St Judith's Lane, Sawtry, Cambs PE17 5XE, England/Ariadne Press, 270 Goins Court, Riverside, CA 92507, USA).

Yazzyk 3, 1994, "Madness, Magic and Mysticism" (Blahoslavova 8, 130 00 Praha 3, Czech Republic).

The Past

Fiction by Michal Ajvaz

I am sitting in the Slavia cafe, looking around at the customers. Over there I recognize the sharp bird-like profile of a man who, one stormy night, pursued me with a Malayan dagger through the mazes of Orient Express, past the locked doors of the compartments, I remember his long nightshirt lit up now and again by flashes of lightning, the curtains of the open window flapping into the corridor and violently beating me in the face. How long ago was it? Five years ago, or was it ten? And what was the cause of our dispute anyway? I think it had something to do with rubies buried in a snowdrift in the woods, or perhaps with the question of whether linguistic signs are motivated or unmotivated. And that woman there, who is pensively combing out her wavy red hair, its fraying ends shining in the low sun of this October afternoon: I lived with her for seven years in a desolate house standing on concrete pillars in the midst of a decaying lake surrounded by jungle, a house with empty rooms where mysterious maps of mold grew out of the white walls in the ever-present sound of dripping water, every night we sat on the terrace, looking at the cool surface and at the dim jungle echoing with the shrieks of animals, and we talked about the life which we would lead together once we returned to Europe. The man arguing at the bar with the waiter is a former friend of mine with whom I wrote a thousand-page book in Freiburg entitled *Grundstrukturen der Wirklichkeit*, a book we thought would be a revolution in philosophy, the greatest philosophical work since Aristotle (in the end, during some adventure I no longer remember, the only copy of the manuscript was devoured by a crocodile). I see here a few more faces that I came across in underground passageways, in the cell of a Buddhist monastery, at night on the narrow ledge of the eightieth floor of a skyscraper high over a sleeping town, I come upon faces which I had glimpsed

twisted in convulsions of ecstasy at voodoo ceremonies, upon eyes with an evil look peering at me on the bottom of the sea through the tiny round windows of diving helmets. Now we all pretend that we don't know each other. We do not greet each other and are careful not to catch one another's eye, although we furtively sneak a look at someone when we think he is not watching.

Sometimes, actually rather often, the situation becomes quite awkward. Once I was waiting at the Slavia for a friend who had some business to take care of at the television studio. She appeared at the glass doors with a man about forty-five years old, his hair cut short and combed down to the forehead in the style of Prague intellectuals. He seems familiar, but I cannot remember where I know him from. When they found my table, my friend introduced her companion to me: "This is script-editor M. from Kratky Film." I suddenly remember: this is the man with whom I once fought an entire day in some town on a deserted marble piazza with fountains, the heat was terrible and numbing, the sun glowed mercilessly above our heads, in the silence of the deserted square you could hear only the murmur of water falling in the fountains, the clashes of our heavy swords, their echoes resounding from the façade of a palace with monotonous rows of Corinthian columns. It was clear that he had recognized me too, we smiled wryly at each other, shook each other's limp hands, and mumbled something. How frightful are encounters with specters of the untamed past. We both tried not to reveal anything but the conversation was an even greater torment for us than that struggle on the scorching marble. At no time did we speak to each other, we always turned to our friend and by complex means avoided direct address. We nearly wrenched our eyes out of their sockets in order not to cross glances, but I occasionally squinted at him and behind the



Illustration by Veronica Bromová

puzzled purple face I recalled the hard visage of a samurai against the background of the rows of white palace columns. Back then he wore a gold helmet whose pointed shape was somewhat reminiscent of a large radish. It glistened in the sun and its evil glare scorched my tired eyes.

The distressing conversation was about some upcoming puppet film on Dachshunds. The editor/samurai began fumbling around in his briefcase for the script but I made him nervous and he just couldn't find it, with trembling hands he kept pulling out bits of crumpled paper and piling them up on the table from which they fell down on the floor, and on top of it all, the gold helmet shaped like a radish fell on the green marble table-top and rang out in such a clear and challenging voice that the entire cafe fell

silent and looked at the helmet gently rocking on the green marble in front of the frozen editor, through the silence floated the melody of the song *L'important, c'est la rose*, which a swollen-faced dandy in a red jacket was playing with a dreamy smile on the piano. (Why do we always carry around in our bags and briefcases weapons from hushed up nocturnal combats, crystals of solidified poison in red velvet-cushioned boxes, the head of the Gorgon Medusa, tongues cut out from the mouths of dragons, the mummy of a dwarf, compromising correspondence in Sumerian, why do we drag along the terrible entrails of the past even though they frighten us and disgust us, even though we know that wherever we are, in a cafe or a bar or on a visit, inexorable Moira wants them to spill out on the table?) □

The Concert

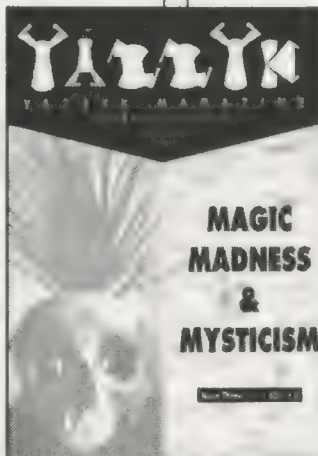
Fiction by Michal Ajvaz

I am playing the piano in a private hall opening onto a garden; I know that the entire future of my career — whether I will assert myself as a piano virtuoso and go on world tours or return to my burrow — depends on my performance. At first I am calm and concentrated, I am just slightly bothered by the fact that the piano keys are strangely sticky, as if coated with honey, or rather as if they were made of wax and heat was dissolving their upper layer. The keys stick to my fingers more and more, it's quite unpleasant, especially when I play fast passages, but I try not to let myself be troubled by this, after all, I have lived through all sorts of things during concerts, I remember playing in a club where a rat ran over the keys, its little feet plucked false chords, a silly rat song which wove itself into my sonata, the rat pursued my hands flying over the keys and bit them whenever it got the chance. In spite of it all I played the piece to the end, the tip of my little finger bitten off, on keys sprinkled with blood. I've also had a little hairy beast inadvertently get

under my piano and curl up to sleep; when I tried to strike the pedal during a lyrical passage, I stepped on the animal's head, it let out a wretched howl, flew out from under the piano and started running around the stage in a panic, howling and whining at the same time. Even then I finished the concert, although the composition was accompanied to the last note by the wailing of the beast. Sticky keys, however, are more unpleasant than any beast, the worst of it all is that the keys stick to one another, so that when I hit one, five or six of them sink at the same time amid a diabolic dissonance. With displeasure I feel that the keys are becoming softer and softer, my fingers sink into them ever more deeply. Now a finger pokes through the whole key, I can't free it fast enough, and when I pull my finger out of the melted key, it makes an unappetizing smacking slurping noise (like the sound your foot makes when you pull it out of the mud), and the soft grunting of the piano interferes with the tones of the musical composition. But not even the tones

resounding from the piano chords ring clearly any more, the sharp boundaries dissolve into each other and lax transitions ensue, one tone lazily overflows into the other and at the same time does not expire in the other tone, it continues to sound along with all the other tones which have already settled in its depths, and thus individual tones, dissolving in the amorphous memory of the piano, less and less distinguishable from each other, come closer and closer to merging into a single tone, into a hum encompassing all notes. On top of all this, a fog is spreading through space, a thickening white fog, only the black keys still stand out vaguely in the spreading whiteness, then even they disappear, I play blindly, my hands wearily and heavily plow through the melting keys, like Bard through Antarctic snows; when I raise my hands, I pull up the melted keys like wads of chewing gum, my hands are all sticky and I keep wiping them off on my pants, it is quite inconvenient to play in such circumstances and it brings no pleasure; besides, I don't know if it's really worth playing at all for only a single tone sounds from the piano, a single hum containing all notes, I play on and it occurs to me that the humming from the piano contains all the musical pieces which have ever been and ever will be composed, even the never written pieces of genius composers who died in their youth, I listen to the monotonous hum and feel that I am gradually beginning to like it, it seems that from time to time I hear magnificent compositions concealed within it, more beautiful than anything I have ever heard, I feel discomfort and disgust gradually giving way to joyous ecstasy, this is the best concert ever I tell myself, my best performance, let the music critics say what they want about it, I raise my hands for the final accord, the dough of the piano keys hangs from them in flapping noodles, and then I lean over and triumphantly plunge them into the keyboard, I penetrate up to my elbows, up to my shoulders, to the sounds of astral humming I sink with delight into the morass of the melted piano. □

Translated from the Czech by Farimah Daftary, "The Past" and "The Concert" first appeared in *Yazzyk* #1, 1992. They are reprinted with the kind permission of the author and *Yazzyk* magazine.



REVIEW

Yazzyk #3

84pp, Europe \$12:50 (3/\$33), r.o.w. \$13:50 (3/\$36)
from *Yazzyk* Magazine, Blahoslavova 8, Praha 3 –
130 00, Czech Republic

New writing from a new country. The place, in fact, that elected Havel president and asked Zappa to be foreign secretary. It has also, thanks to the usual suspects, a literary tradition quite the equal in every way to the Latin magic realism movement. This country has style.

With such a background, *Yazzyk* could only really surprise us if it failed. Let's see how it succeeded.

Using an excerpt from a novel as the opening piece is a courageous decision. Using an excerpt from Michal Ajvaz's *In the Tower* borders on madness. There is a coherent narrative thread, but the surreal nature of the events and characters virtually turns it into a mood piece. It is followed by Randall Lyman's "The Apprenticeship", which is much more subtle, and by the time that you've finished it, you have a feel for the territory of the magazine. An American encounters a writer in a bar and, although at first dubious of him, he becomes intrigued and learns to respect the man. After the writer's departure, the American questions the regulars and gets yet another, quite different perspective of him in this quiet and efficient study of character.

"The Freak", by Jakub Horák, is the story that most evokes the 'K' word. The aptly named Mr Keith works in an old patent registry, cleaning out rooms filled with dusty old inventions. Just taste that claustrophobia. Horák's other story, "No Interest", concerns a man who goes to visit his plot of land in the mountains only to find that a large boulder has appeared in it. His efforts to arrange its removal are, again, familiar.

The two stories from Ladislav Klíma (1878–1928) are excellent, but pale when compared to samples of his autobiography. This was one of the most eccentric men ever to have lived, an ascetic who believed that cooking was a waste of time and stripped food of vitamins, and who once even stole a mouse from a cat and devoured it whole.

Rémi Diligent explores the inevitable guilt that comes with relationships with a deft touch of humour. Jiri Daníček portrays a strange self-contained world of farmers in "Chinese Cabbage" who start to question the reasons behind existence but lack – who doesn't? – the depth of knowledge that would make sense of it. Colin Hamilton blends prose and poetry seamlessly to create the puzzle of "The Shoe Cobbler". There is a fair amount of poetry elsewhere, with Ivan Jirous providing the best of it.

There is the occasional piece that is overwritten, though how much of this is due to a poor translation I can only guess. What is remarkable is the high quality of most of the translations. If any of the other work has suffered in translation, then the originals must be awesome.

Jim Steel

Interview with an Autocatalytic Homeostatic Device

Paul Di Filippo and Darick Chamberlin

I first encountered the astonishing Darick Chamberlin in this manner.

Steve Brown, editor of *SF Eye*, called one day out of the blue event horizon.

"Paul, I've got this, um, book I'd like you to review. I think it's titled *Cigarette Boy*, and I think it's self-published. Hard to tell. The author *might* be some guy named Chamberlin. Spiral bound, nice cover. But inside – It's, ah, about one hundred pages of unpunctuated capital letters. Might be a story in there somewhere. But you're the only one I know who can handle this. What do you say?"

What could I say to such a flattering and intriguing challenge, except "Send it on!"

And I'm glad I did.

Cigarette Boy proved to be a rewarding, innovative, mind-blowing read, despite its forbidding façade (see my review in *SF Eye* #11). Not a common phenomenon in today's share-cropped, strip-mined SF marketplace. And Darick Chamberlin proved to be not only a multi-talented artist, fluent with images as well as words (the cover art that intrigued Steve was Darick's), but also an intriguing e-mail correspondent.

As you all will now get to see. (PDF)

Darick, what brought you to settle in your current hometown, Seattle, Washington?

It's funny. I initially moved here merely to get out of Ohio. I could just as easily have found myself in Susquehanna or Spring, Texas. But I had a friend who had moved out here, pre-grunge, as part of his Gary Snyder thing, and so I came here on a "you can land here and get on your feet" kind of deal. Then two more friends moved out, also for a change, and Shawn followed, and we have all just been making it up as we go.

Initially, we had intended to get into moviemaking, independent films, something like that. But that got sidetracked and the comics work foregrounded itself.

Now, with the multimedia stuff starting to take, and the DreamWorks SKG business starting to take root, it feels like a good place to be, for all the right reasons, but all accidentally arrived at.

Let's talk SF. What's wrong with science fiction today?

Anthropomorphize science fiction into one Jack Kirby-looking two-page splash page: let's picture science fiction, in whatever state it's in, as a big, weird machine. This machine looks like an armored Goodyear blimp roughly the size of the Houston Astrodome. It's pretty big; it's a big machine. It's kind of organic, but only accidentally, or as camouflage, maybe, like when a preying mantis in Indonesia looks exactly like an orchid. All around it, spinning away, way away, are dead galaxies and debris and dwarfs of various hues and so forth and the occasional quark or square root of two or Tunguska Speck, zooming by indifferently. Keeping pace with this hovering doozie requires that we set our watches to Cosmic Time, with little Geologic Time second hands.

The machine itself is ostentatious; it loves to show off its machineness. It is sometimes as automatic, as guileless, as a vacuum cleaner; at others, as prescient as a timed streetlamp. You might hear the machine hum sometimes with a sort of cryogenic enthusiasm. Usually, though, the machine sulks, a mere 11 feet off the ground, like a bored teenager. All in all, the machine is very *mechanical*. And though dated, and frequently looking it, the Sci-Fi Machine nevertheless is dense with additional machineries, growing on it like a berserk lichen, daily.

This quality in and of itself seems only natural to me. It's not a right or wrong thing. It's like birds gotta fly, fish gotta swim; that kind of thing. Anyway, there are weird pipes jutting out of it, out of this machine, and rampways and cat-walks lacing this or that colossal architectural element over there to its brother or sister over here, and everything's cluttered with kiosks and grills and blue screens and slit with vents and hatchways, and these vents and hatchways are deploying cameras and widgets galore. This machine is chock-full-o' machinery, full of machines making machines.

Gadgets glow everywhere. Gadgetry bristles in a staggeringly selfsimilar range of primary or near-primary plastic colors, and everything is labelled. There are labels and decals and signage of many different kinds all over the Science Fiction Machine, and some of them are even in script. It's a twenty-four hour operation, too; the machine's landing strips and bay doors are aswarm with activity.

The whole brute magilla looks like a close-up of some reef-lurking marine creature, or a satellite topology imaged from patchwork scans of slash-and-burn Brazil. Frequently, off to the side, tiny as aphids, you can occasionally glimpse strange looking human-like creatures as they "man the controls" of this jumbo star truck, steering it through the vapid hypervitality of purplish supernovae, like we might, if we were them.

Now, whatever is wrong with this machine is probably some form of what *was* wrong with this machine, back then. Just 'here' and 'now', in a more nearly present form. In that case, you might really be asking, "what's *STILL* wrong with science fiction?" And I'm not sure. I was reading this Baudrillard thing earlier, and he was talking about Disneyland. And Disneyland I think is a similar machine, or in any case, shares some of the same design elements with our machine-in-question.

And so I will paraphrase the quote: Baudrillard says: "[Sci-Fi] is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary."

When I read that, and then start to think, I immediately think of all those redundant, ugly, airbrush-art covers like you might usually see on *OMNI* magazine, the kinds with Renaissance portraits of imaginary aristocrats, except with wires streaming out of their antique heads instead of hair. That whole business. The flaws and foolishness of the Science Fiction Machine are there for the diagnosing, painfully clearly present, alive in the images that science fiction contrives: the near naked pin-up with the head of a calico cat, the robot Iwo Jima, the Incredible Man With Wheels for Feet, the "Intergalactic Dog-fight". I guess some of these books you *can* judge by their covers. And grids grids grids, grids for days. All of it culminating in obligatory, state-of-the-art, digitally frictionless VR polygons; tetrahedrons even, hovering for no reason at all over a vast meta-grid that stretches to the proverbial 'infinity!' So of course, given this arrest, SF has a PR problem.

How about the corollary to the previous question: what if anything is right with SF?

The one great thing about this machine, and about the ghosts inside that make it up, is that no matter how streamlined it all has yet to become, and no matter how clumsily it performs, it at this time best exhibits a principle of design you might call Fidelity to Weirdness. Fidelity to Weirdness has to do with letting the facts do their stuff, letting the science lead the fiction. It's not extrapolation only; it's something else. And even though this impulse threatens to decentralize human subjectivity or alter it or replace it with an expert system or a worm's eye view or something, science fiction now more than ever comes equipped with features that really do have real utility. And not just for the writer or artist of science fiction, but for definitely everyone. I mean, somewhere right now someone with a handgun is hijacking a tray of frozen embryos. A doctor can cure an illness you may have with concentrated sound. Soon we'll all be sending faxes from the beach, or that's what they tell us, anyway.

The cool thing about science fiction is that it's one of the ones we'll take with us when we leave; it's obviously the only one that can go FTL or to ancient Mesopotamia very convincingly. It's the one we have to use when we write about un- and non-humans, too, and that's a plus.

What's right with it we don't need to fix, just play with some more. If you want to talk about fiction, soon you will find yourself needing to talk about science fiction. But soon after that (or if you are already talking about science fiction), and you are at all like me, you will soon wonder why the form of current science fiction doesn't in some way better express the radical content of SF, rather than just encasing it in its previous historical skins. It strikes me that just as the

images that encase science fiction need sophisticating, the words themselves need some radicalizing, some reconfiguring.

The machine can receive modification, or a series of modifications, from something (or someone) outside itself. Just as easily, though, the machine can and does and should continue to modify *itself*. We can wonder: 'why doesn't it do this more often?' That is something I am very conscious, even self-conscious of, to a high degree; both as a person who writes words and as a person who makes pictures. But why doesn't the rigidly conservative container adapt more ergonomically to the spirits and organisms it contains? Why isn't The Science Fiction Machine as weird as what it flies around exploring? I don't know either.

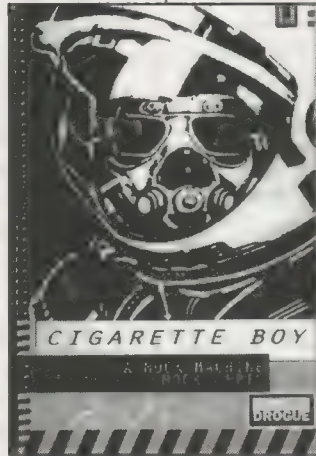
Your conception of SF as an accreted teratological yet hopeful organism, full of useless and miraculous organs, is an exciting one, since it foreshadows or permits growth and a kind of emergent complexity which no simple construction could allow. I also like your notion of working with the "good parts" and letting the "bad" ones atrophy under the weight of their own inutility. After the stylistic and conceptual experiments of *Cigarette Boy*, where is this modus operandum leading you personally? Do you ever conceive of creating a work that could be sort of a disguised "parasite" on the body of SF? I'm thinking of a something impossible, perhaps: a mass-market artifact that subverts its own promulgators ...

Well, a lot of the technique stress of *Cigarette Boy* stuff and the *Beyond Cyberpunk Update Stack* thing are manic refusals to write inside an envelope of tradition. It's deliberate and theorizing can be contoured to it later, as I am doing now, but at the inception and throughout it I was sort of unabled: unable to write the parts 'in between' the moments that feel like the poetry in prose, unable to keep a line, even a meandering line, as a centrality, unable to stick to English or any other language, unable to punctuate. But it felt ... more right. It felt like what the kinaesthetic necessariness was directing me toward; there was lots of permeation between dreams I was having and things I was overhearing incorrectly or

misreading; all a signal/noise dissembly.

And I allowed myself that awfully opaque license precisely because, in the preparation for writing a more self-consciously 'traditional' science fiction story, I found myself keeping shorthand explorations of kinds of themes and voices I would want in the thing. These became *Cigarette Boy*; the actual book referred to in *Cigarette Boy* as 'The Pralines of Los Japonisma' is still a vast vat of bits that remains incompletely imagined; that is why the word START is the first and the last word that appears in *C-Boy*.

It was only after I had put the thing together and started corresponding with Steve Brown just a little for *Science Fiction Eye* stuff, and sending the book out to people, that I really read any of what everybody would call Cyberpunk. And I am not actually as science fiction canon literate as I might need to be, to be so critical and flipped out.



Putting aside fiction for a moment, let's look into techno-cultural-socio-racial matters. Do you buy into the Extropian-Moraveckian-Vingeian notion of a sea-change sweeping over humanity anytime soon, rendering us godlike? Are such "Singularity" scenarios just wish-fulfillment pipe-dreams, a kind of mental masturbation? Or do they shadow forth some kind of Jungian archetypes? Everyman cursed/ blessed with a Zeus-envy complex?

I do. I saw Terence McKenna speak at Kane Hall here at the University and it was great; he was so intelligent but in such an applied way. And all of his Timewave Zero 2012 Mayan Apocalypse theories seem to articulate something I feel, rather than even think. You can feel, if you fly in a plane for example, the inherent worthwhileness of conceptualizing human culture and all of its concretes as being like some macro-fuzz, spreading itself over the thin membrane of biological conditions ... and the gush of inaudible voices you hear in the white noise of your cordless phone are speaking invisible volumes about the present conditions as they are now.

I think though that it will be a brutal, animal fact, and not some mental platform. It won't be like, one morning you wake up and look out in the back yard and there will be a big 2001 starchild with your face looking into your patio window. It will be more like



those frenzies that insects like bees get into. It'll be invasive at the level of the cell, at least, so it should be a doozie.

Who are your favorite writers outside the SF field?

I have *Sixty Stories* by Donald Barthelme, and I don't know if people think of him as science fiction or what, but he by and far writes with the wildest combination of power and restraint of anybody I've ever read. I read more non-fiction than fiction.

Have you read Hakim Bey? I was thinking about him with regards to the blurline 'twixt fiction and non-fiction ... I mean, he's non, but it feels like a fabbed Necronomicon psyche-out in places ... Which I think is radically good!

Yes, I've been reading Hakim Bey ever since the days when I published my zine, Astral Avenue, and I was somehow fortunate enough to pick him up as a correspondent. I do agree with you that "non-fiction" such as his can possess all the brio and excitement of fiction. Maybe "the New Journalism invades SF"?

What new projects are you working on?

I'm working on actually getting a comic done, a full-on Mobius-esque type of thing, and that will require some real mojo. I'm pretty intimidated by all the various everythings, but I've been taking so many notes and stuff I should just do it. The same with the book-book that *Cigarette Boy* prequels and the other, more "plot driven" thing. And I really feel the Call to Hyperwrite, making hypertext link writing, but have yet to get the toys for that.

I would also like to get more involved in doing experiments and Net stuff and writing by committee or by multi-maker roulettes. I think lots of cool Surrealist Parlor game type stuff are really ready-made with the Net and with click-and-drag culture spreading like the necessary cancer it is.

But right now: a comic.

The comic sounds wild. Good luck! Meanwhile, another dumb question: Are you into conspiracy theory at all? Any empathy for the Illuminati/ Subgenius/Paranoia set? Or do you prefer pronoia?

If pronoia is the same as 'creative paranoia', then yeah. Not as if necessarily the structures we map onto experience or history or anything are there, but that we cannot help but to experience them, at the best and worst times, as there. That to me is the up side to

modernisms and post modernisms and post post modernisms – psychology models and scientisms – how the actual facts of experience can be creatively seen holographically. Which on macros and micros bears out.

Language functions in the same Grey Magic way: you misread something, or it's oblique enough to you, and your *la parole* gets all mixed in with your *la langue*, and in no time, accidents are fitting together in very Rosicrucian ways.

I read the bridge column in the Sunday paper as my horoscope sometimes. And since I know even less than nothing about bridge, all the moves and ruffs and trumping and all the personifications (North and West and all) really sometimes eerily sync-up. Try it, it's pretty cool.

But was there a Merovingian plot engineering the Iran Hostage Crisis and the subsequent, top-secret aerial assassination of Stevie Ray Vaughan?

Not so much, probably.

What artists working in other media do you admire? Painters, comic book illustrators, graphic artists, sculptors, conceptual artists?

I just watched this weird videotape of 'The Making of a Saga', and it was this making of *Star Wars* thing, hosted by Mark Hammill and with all these behind the scenes effects clips and stuff. And I was in 7th grade when *Star Wars* came out, and I remember how going to see it was like this mutant Confirmation, much more intense and real to me than my Catholic Confirmation (which I also went to see in the 7th grade, which is late for that). It just was like this threshold.

Anyway, it was hilarious, watching the footage of the effects guys, who were all skinny little guys with beards, and they would be working puppets on camera, but it was film of them doing that, so they weren't looking at the camera. It was weird, in between takes, the alien costume extras sucking air from tubes and stuff.

And the completeness of the success of the idea of that world, it was the only thing better to me than the Beatles.

Like, the sound of Darth Vader's helmet as it connects to his neck-piece, the 'kssss' sound or something; that informs me as a detail of making stuff so much more than many actually 'cultural' things, per se, like an Ibsen play or a Rothko painting.

I remember getting sad, actually melancholy, when Jim Henson died a few years ago. I always wanted to be



even some set flunky on some sprawling thing like the *Dark Crystal*. Geez.

In comics, I like good Chaykin or *Ronin* by Frank Miller; I usually don't like 'funny' comics, unless they are completely irreducible, like *Jim* by Jim Woodring. I really admire David Lynch; did you see that huge coffee-table book thing with his paintings in it? I like Ashley Bickerton. I like Negativland. I like everything almost in the glossary of 'Terminal Identity', by Scott Bukatman. Duchamp, Eno, Japanese Robot comics, Giger ...

Your mention of Eno brings up the always interesting topic of musical tastes. What other music do you enjoy? Is it Eno's ambient stuff or his more pop-oriented things you like? Do you have a particular favorite Golden Age of pop music, or do you believe that "these are the good old days"?

I feel like Eno is the college professor I never had. He's like the Great Gazoo or whatever on the Flintstones; he's 'The Man'. I have a kind of hard to get book, apparently, about his collaborations with Russell Mills, and it is a great lens through which lots of future history seems to be leaking. The sort of way one discipline or theory-cluster informs another for him, in a way that he bridges them ... He's amazing. All of it, and all of it that you don't and can't hear and see.

Once I was in New York City for, like, 3 days (believe that or not). And Eno had some installation in the Financial Center, the lobby between the Two World Trade Centers; it's a vast palatial corporate space, as brass and marble and sleek as can be currently constructed. It was like something out of an Isaac

Asimov book, especially to me, an Ohio boy. The restrooms in the World Trade Center are easily as plush and lavish as the actual dining room of many a metropolitan 4-star restaurant.

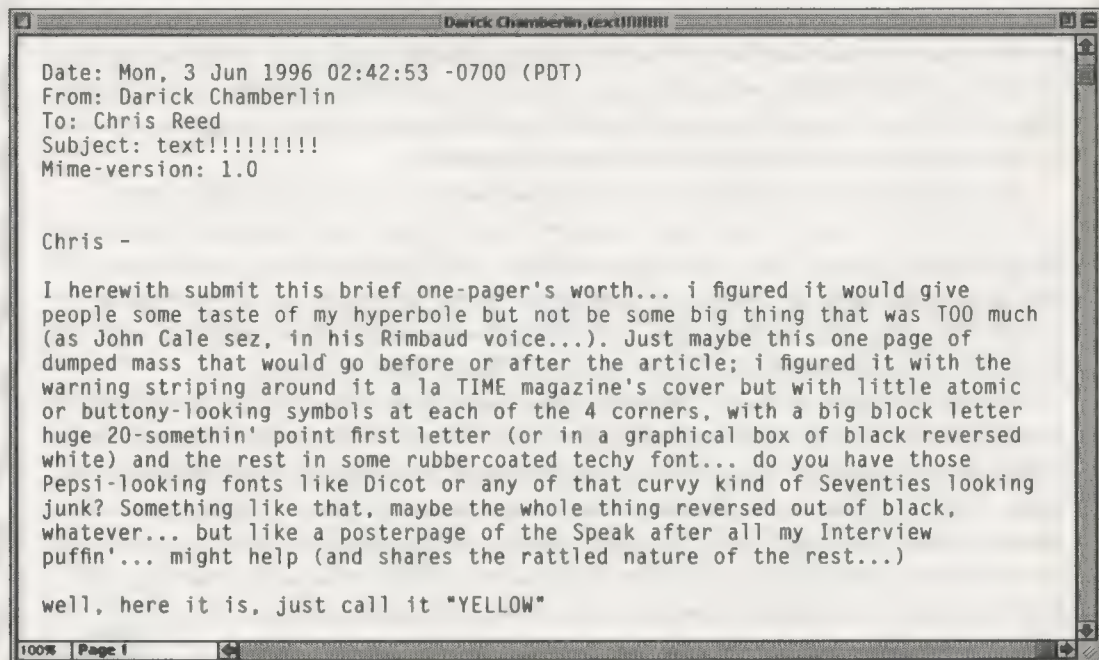
And his installation was over 400 speakers, in different places of this huge lobby, all playing different rain-forest animal sounds, and crickety chirps and buzzing muffled hums and stuff. And there were of course expensive plants and stuff already there, but the acoustic design had been completely undesigned; *unANYTHING*; and all this here, in the showroom at the center of the Empire.

It was the last weekend that was there; I was lucky to see it. It was very cool.

Darick, what would you like to do with the rest of your life?

I'm thinking of setting up a little snack cart somewhere on the Asteroid Belt with those rotating trees of soybean franks and little foil bags of juice-like beverages and bootleg Penrose tapes and cartons of Crystal Pepsi and Nova Cola and hologram posters, and then of hawking "official" tourist ashtrays and of co-designing dead astronaut memorabilia Internet sites with an expert system named Kenny who was "born" in a domehouse in Boulder, Colorado, and who has a sister named Sabrina (a Sagittarius!).

● Contact Darick Chamberlin at 1629 Harvard Ave. #202, Seattle, WA 98122, USA (e-mail: drogue@eskimo.com), and check out the lavish Cigarette Boy stuff and the Beatkit Zone at his and Shawn Wolfe's website (<http://www.zaius.com/zaius>).



YELLOW

Not the saffron yellow, so much; the yellow of egg yolks and eatable bananas, daisies in their middle, 19th Century Buddhism, the silks of corn and Swedish girls, the lemon yellows of light and noon sun, not these; I love these, yes, but these are born loved.

Right here is a different yellow, a yellow to note that is, in point of fact, the one 'that men choose when they attack the Earth'; for example, as they do when they do with their trawling claws and forty-foot base stations and big steel balls they wreck with. Is there I wonder a specialist's name, some nomenclature for this yellow, this particular mean-cuss yellow with no time or concern for mellow, this black-trimmed yellow that I love so much today, which is a yellow more Citroën than citron, more dead than alive, this armorcoat Gargoyle yellow of anonymously identical meters, of steel and iron grates and sourly greased rivets and uncanny ramps, of studded plates and wastedump washbasins, this marooned-yellow yellow of a sunken, damaged winch? Or that vehicle parked across the street, even.

And it gleams dead enough right there, look at that: the precise color of lightning when it decides a week early on a clear aqua day when it will next strike; exactly the cast, tinge and approximate Fisher-Price tint of the overalls and coveralls stained with midnight sun emergency in an infernal, Crisis Kuwait ... the gleaming Ryder-truck yellow of bumper grooves and heavy duty. The yellow of feedback, fed. Sticker yellow. Kodak yellow. The yellow used on checks from the bank and receipts peppered with pale, grey printout. That is the yellow I mean.

I mean and love the Industrial Schoolbus Mustard Pantone Yellow, the Process Yellow of all these dying industries, the brute yellow 'darshan' of plastics and warning ribbons and caution signage, the yellow of deaf-mute Assyrian War Deities: the spectacular and redundant yellow, baked to mock-orange, by the expensive coalblack sun.

The mute yellow all around in evidence bags and garbage dumps, the yellow today of cranes and helmets and facegrills and power tools and power tool advertising and superhero costumes; of Tonka trucks, taxis, and airbus (the plural of airbus), of tickets and Texaco, wires and cogs; also the skeleton Fallout Shelter yellow, the color of warrings, selected unadvertised in the goldless, obligatory yellows of pool objects and flightsuits and toxic cannisters being smuggled out to sea; the undead Hitachi yellow of snorkles and floodlight molding ...

Our newly incorporated yellow in quotes; "Yellow", perhaps, with an exclamation point ...

I want today all the utilitarian glare around my beech and blue body a yellower yellow, more like the ballpark shade of Shell-yellow and such fossils, and SRL robot remains, and of abandoned launchpads with baleful gantries and crushed domes, than of the more run-of-the-mill yellows we are all sick to death of by now, as yellow as old newspapers as those yellows sometimes seem, not to mention the aging proponents of those weak and failing yellows, my enemies ...

I want to be right here, seeing it flashing in crab-claw utilitarian glare, inorganic, everywhere, the indestructible color of what separates us from crime scenes; or that, on fat tire-treads, rushes us fresh, sweet gas and the juices we need to enliven vast golf-course lawnmowers which look like beetles from the highway; the Median Yellow, broken or un-; the yellow "Yellow" yellow that adorns our most democratic procedures, preventing and mediating statistical death and municipal power; the dumb yellow of a thermonuclear nosecone, the yellow that sweats in time, that seals us in, the one today that blinks with caution yes but with decision and power too, in between the red 'stops' and the 'go's of green ...



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Letters

of Comment

From Mark Amerika, Boulder, Colorado

Thanks for sending me the slam-reviews of Black Ice Books. We must have really touched a nerve with your reviewers as they were very keen on trying to harken back to a time when things like fiction and narrative story-telling made much more sense and were more conventionally 'held together'. A sweet, conservative world it would be indeed. I've heard it all before. My translation of these negative reviews is "if I don't understand it, it must be bad writing." Or: "I've made my mark covering and championing the cyberpunks, and now that that's dead, I refuse to allow these language tricksters to come into my camp and destroy everything I've created." I understand this. I'd be pissed off too. I AM pissed off. Here I was writing this unreadable, unwrite-able, post-pomo, post-cyber, post-neoist hypertext of my consciousness-in-formation, and now it's one bloody year later and I've already got a mainstream book contract, mainstream reviews (all of them positive) and a thirty-minute interview on National Public Radio. *It wasn't supposed to be this way* but that's the media-marketplace creating instant-conformity and if you think this Avant-Pop stuff is boring and dead, imagine what people think of the conventional story-telling that informs most of the SF and cyberpunk fiction your reviewers have been sleeping with.

Thanks to people like Larry McCaffery, Takayuki Tatsumi, Steve Brown, Matt Fuller and countless others, the Avant-Pop movement (yes, it's a movement, which cyberpunk is a subset of – deal with it!), is virtually infecting the alternative culture in a way that will lead to a rapid decomposition of the Host. The Host includes all of those who go out of their way to maintain the status quo of everyday life which your reviewers seem all too eager to do. May the best cannibal win!

From John Francis Haines, Warrington

Why do I get the impression from the reviews that your reviewers are getting bored with postmodernist fiction? They've certainly done a good job in steering me well away from authors I might otherwise have tried. I know the world is a terrible place, but why do all these writers seem to love writing about so much despair? I'm not inspired to grab a book of 'grunge fiction' for light relief after having all my hopes for humanity sunk into my boots after half an hour of the evening news. As Paul Kincaid so sensibly notes, it's all been done before, and after nigh on a century of this type of writing in one form or other it's getting to the stage where I for one would like a change of tack. No, I don't want Mills & Boon, but then I don't want fiction in which every character is a low-life drifter and drug-addict or whore, written in a foul-mouthed incomprehensible stream-of-consciousness. What I want is intelligently written fiction I can *enjoy* reading, not something that makes me feel I'm reading semi-pornography. Too much to ask, I suppose, though BBR seems to be attempting a pretty good fist of it at the moment – keep it up.

From Ellen Darlow, New York

Just finished reading BBR #22. Looks terrific if a bit overdesigned in spots. Couldn't read titles for the Rymland or Kirby. Who did the cover – I couldn't find credit for it. I particularly love the Directory in the back.

From Syd Foster, Swansea

I like the design of #22 (cover's brilliant!) and the full title in that stocky print face looks really forthright and self-composed; a determined, bold but non-belligerent assertion of intent. My favourite piece is "Body of Life" by David Kerekes. This could have been trite and

'adolescent', but Mr Kerekes has the poetic eye/brain to rise to the form, and it *works!* "Marsfall" came close to working too. The difficulty with such pieces (as with poetry) is that you have to get your head ready to rock (so to speak) before taking the plunge into reading, or it just goes in one eye and out the other ... keep on demanding that your readers bring an active attention/creative mind to the interactive realm of your magazine, please! □

From Carl Thomas, Wrexham

Your *Back Brain Recluse* I found very nice to look at. I wasn't expecting such a well-produced, attractively illustrated and printed magazine. I haven't gotten round to reading any of the stories yet, but I loved the reviews section and the Directory. I also thought the letters section had balls, and was highly amused by some of the more animated letters.

Allen Ashley's review of *Grue* was a bit of a joke though. I had the very same copy he reviewed, #15, but hadn't read it at this stage. After reading his review, I was almost afraid to read it. I almost imagined that the stories had been written by a jolly group of inmates from one of America's high-security fish bowls. At last, I thought, some stories that'll take me to the brink and hang me over the edge.

So, you can imagine my disappointment when I did get round to it. Instead of being corrupted, in the nicest possible ways, I was merely offered some good entertainment, with well-written stories penned by well-balanced individuals. I searched everywhere for the point to Allen Ashley's preachings, but couldn't find it anywhere.

There was also a good selection of poetry. I particularly liked Wayne Allen Sallee's spattering of poems. But none of this was mentioned by Allen Ashley, God bless him.

My point is this: after reading *Grue* #15, I started to wonder if perhaps Allen would be better suited to reviewing light romance, instead of good, *mainstream* horror. And as for his raising the possibility of censorship of this kind of writing: well, if you censor this, you'll censor anything. And if this is what you call 'the raw edge of horror', then my name's Mary Whitehouse and I wear a fluffy hat to church.

I'm not getting at Allen, you understand, I found his review to be well-written and entertaining, and he'd probably like to know that his piece stirred a response from somebody. But, I do think that getting someone who's deeply into the genre which they review, is a good idea. □

From Martin Burroughs, Oldham

Haven't read all of *BBR* #22 yet, but it looks good so far – apart from the cover that is. Clip-art runners? Very cheap. Interior presentation still excellent though, especially the Lizbeth Rymland piece. □

From Paul Laville, Mitcham, Surrey

It annoys me that science fiction (and like stuff), in its efforts to become widely respected within the world of Literature, appears to be drowning in the excesses of its own self-importance. Publishers and magazine editors appear to be constantly subdividing SF into various strains, some of which are regarded as being more worthy than others. For example: David Pringle is so much in love with J.G. Ballard that he probably makes love to his autograph every night. The people at Gollancz love Paul J. McAuley so much that they publish his book about the Italian Renaissance (erm ... that is science fiction isn't it?)

Steampunk, cyberpunk, streetwise hardcore SF. Believe me there's nothing streetwise about *Neuromancer* or *Virtual Light*. How could there be? William Gibson is nearly fifty for Robert's sake! How does he know what the Kids are like? Answer: he doesn't. His work is crap. His books read like you're trying to swallow a block of lard. Die-hard elitists like the staff of *Interpuke* continually promote Gibson and his chums as being the true visionaries of science fiction, and this carries over into the publishers' lists, so we're given dross like *Steel Beach*, *Harm's Way* (whatever that is) and *Red Dust*. The only Good stuff, as is the way with our society in both Literature and Art, has to remain underground. But that's a subjective opinion.

The point of this is that some people prefer one sort of science fiction, some people prefer others. Science fiction's such a huge genre with such an enormous scope that it really can't afford to be so fucking elitist. I don't like cyberpunk, okay, that's my business. I can dismiss it as being crap because I'm just a reader. It is up to editors to present their readership with different branches of all kinds of SF and allow the reader to make up his or her mind as to whether it is good or not good. One in such a position can't really afford to dismiss any particular kind of SF because it doesn't fulfil such and such criteria. To be honest I'd rather read *Doctor Who* and *The Zarbi* than another William Gibson ripoff.

So why must everything be attached to a label? I'm a mite pissed with seeing things like 'slipstream' and 'hardcore' and 'middle ground SF'. Unfortunately, although *BBR* is much more happily objective than *Interzone*, it still sticks to labels. I categorise stories in either of only two files: 'Good' and 'Not Good'; it either makes me want to read more or screw it up and throw it at the cats.

I had to throw the last copy of *Interzone* at the cats but they survived. If I was to throw *BBR* at the cats then this magazine, being a glossy-type big thick wad of quality paper, would win out. The cats would get badly hurt, the girlfriend would shout at me and then burn my hair while I was asleep. So, for the sake of her cats (Nigel and Bob) and my peaceful slumber, continue making *BBR* the most readable collection of Good fiction available. □

From Martin Hull, Horley, Surrey

I just wanted to let you know that I've read *BBR* and I was very impressed. Slick, professional and full of good stories. A bit depressing for me really, to see that level of competition.

I was looking over the first two issues and comparing them with #22. The difference is amazing but there is also a similarity of style that shows through. You have certainly done a brilliant job with the magazine. May you and *BBR* continue to prosper. □

From National Union to Campaign Against Statutory Entrapment, Nottingham

Having supported the campaign to clear Brian's name, we read with some interest how further evidence of Brian being framed has come to light. This being when the talking dog was banned from giving the vital evidence proving that Brian still possessed all his marbles, during that most scandalous case, infamously dubbed by the press as "The Great Marbles Cheating Trial". We are pleased to see that the campaign is still able to extract information from some of the Perpetrators (issue #22, "A Heart for Lucretia"), and we hope this is a sign of the campaign magazine taking a stronger stance on this injustice.

We are however disappointed to read Mogollón news articles and find they are more domestic than informative of the campaign to Back Brian's Release (*BBR*), the basis for which the magazine has been so successful.

PS. Does the cover of issue #22 symbolise Brian's Breakout Run?

PPS. Are the arrows on the *BBR* t-shirt symbolic of Brian's incarceration? □

From Mark Rich, Stevens Point, Wisconsin

Received the new *Back Brain Recluse* in good shape. A beautiful publication – good art, excellent layout, and except for the preponderance of us US writers some absorbing reading: what a treat. My compliments on the tasteful and attractive appearance of my drowned goddess. Especially liked the art by Kevin Cullen and Dreyfus – although the latter's title page made me turn back to the contents page to try to figure out what the title was. Of the fiction Kirby's "The Shimmering Sands" and Peck's "Eat to Win" win my votes for best-of. The Tim Nickels story I wanted to like but found myself stymied by the christian/semi-christian matter, especially by the way it clunks down heavily at the end: and for all I initially planned to give the thing a second reading, to puzzle out some of the more puzzling action and interaction, I'm unable to: the ending left me suddenly disinterested or rather uninterested. The Darick Chamberlin I have yet to read completely through. I tackle a bit here and there, chew on it, spit it out. It feels so indigestible I want to like it the way

one likes a homely little dog: but I'll have to wait and see if I can ever get through it completely. Uncle River, however, remains as chewable and nutritious as always: bravo to *BBR* for giving him a forum.

Beautiful as the magazine is, will it sell at this price? At least – at very least – it should convince the world as to the seriousness of your intent. I'm probably too lukewarm about the Webb and Di Filippo – they do deliver interesting fiction, after all; but in that case I'm not enthusiastic enough about the Kirby story either, which held and compelled, and gave me that little stabbing feeling of stumbling across the unknown. Part of the unknown: why the hell does the thing work, as fiction? What's the attraction? All I've arrived at is that Kirby paints the mythical West in the terms we know it best by: 'filmic' terms – it is a thin membrane of understanding that warps and burns away under close examination. The ending of the tale extends that to the present day: we live in a film world. Burn it away, folks. Here comes this guy who literally tries to lay his illusions to rest, and it never works.

Yo, enough of that. Congratulations on a fantastic, thoughtful and thought-provoking issue: it makes us all look better than we really are. Someday maybe we can return the favor. □

From Julie Travis, Kensal Green, London

The morality of horror writing has always appeared to me to be a debate waiting to happen, so it was good to read Allen Ashley's comments in his review of *Grue* magazine in *BBR* #22. It's a huge subject, but as a horror writer one I've been involved with for a few years now. Basically this is what I've learnt:

— the murder fantasy/misogynistic rape writer/reader can be split into two categories, a) the immature little twat who thinks serial killers are cool subversives, and b) the adolescent 14-year-old boy with a complete inability to relate to women. Those filed under b) are pretty easy to laugh at, especially now Beavis and Butthead are on our screens; these people may grow up at some stage. Those under category a) annoy me intensely. They want to be seen as sick, deviant, outside of society. They usually live at home with mummy and daddy, go to college, and have never been in a threatening or violent situation in their mundane lives. From what I've read of serial killers, they're boring, insecure, pathetic men, often victims themselves of childhood abuse. The grown up misogynist is the one that disturbs me the most – in all walks of life, the hatred that men have for women is quite phenomenal. Yeah, women don't seem to like men very much either, but as a woman it's more than depressing to have to put up with men that can't handle the fact that your life does not revolve around them.

— morality often ends up as censorship. Everyone's morals are different, but some people seem to think

that if they personally don't like something, then the rest of us shouldn't be allowed to see/hear/read it. In this country we're so fucked up that it's okay for kiddies to see people suffocating to death at Hillsborough on the news or in the full-colour poster printed in the *Daily Mirror* but two people pretending to have sex on TV is obscene. The film *Child's Play* is a joke, nothing more; the debate in the British tabloids is purely a smokescreen, because no one really wants to know why those two children killed Jamie Bulger. I think horror should address these issues – partly because everyone has a dark side and it should be acknowledged but mostly because if we can understand why people do go out and rape women/mutilate children we'll be closer to stopping it. Also a trashy novel about giant crabs or slugs or a man in a hockey mask killing American teenagers is just that – trash. Horror writing is a joke, for the most part. And it's a shame, because it could be so much more.

At the top of my road a few weeks back a man ran up behind a bloke out walking his dog and slit his throat, leaving the bloodied knife on my doorstep for me to find the next morning. As far as I know he hasn't been arrested yet – that means of course he's still out there. Now that's real horror, and somehow I can't think of him as a rebel, just another mad bastard that needs to be taken off the streets. □

From Barbara Davies, Cheltenham

What a stunner issue #22 is – the fiction, especially Paul Di Filippo's "Mud Puppy Goes Uptown", is at last understandable and engrossing. Previous issues have left me puzzled, and quite often I gave up on trying to read the 'stories'. But you don't put a foot wrong this time, and Uncle River is as charming as ever.

More like this please! □

From Michael Jelley, Bristol

I really like the 'manual' type of cover. It does lend an air of 'professionalism' to the publication. I also hope that the cover retains its simpleness (small pattern on a marbled background), as compared to some garish pen and ink type drawing. □

From Katherine Roberts, Ross-on-Wye, Herefordshire

Thank you for the copy of *BBR* #22. I'm impressed. A couple of years ago when I first thought about writing SF, I thought the only magazine that published it was *Interzone* – boy, was I wrong! Since then I've been working my way round the small press with interest, and I have to admit *BBR* is the most professionally produced publication I've seen to date. I enjoyed most of the contents too, the only exceptions being "Flagellante's Search for the Eelgirl" (which I thought

dressed-up nonsense) and "Marsfall" (a lot of which I didn't understand, though I think the idea good). Quite my favourite story was "A Heart for Lucretia" by Jeff VanderMeer. I liked the ballad approach, and the contrast between beauty and ugliness. The review and Directory pages look useful, though slightly out of date? Or is this because I received *BBR* #22 a while after it was published? Still, plenty to keep me amused there ... I'd best get busy! □

From Andras Millward, Aberystwyth

BBR #22 had some of the strongest and best pieces I've seen in *BBR* for a while, with Stratford Kirby's "The Shimmering Sands" and Don Webb's "The Way Out" by far the outstanding pieces. Paul Di Filippo, Brooks Peck and Darick Chamberlin's pieces also deserve an honourable mention; "Marsfall" was either complete gobbledygook or brilliant extrapolation, but I'm just about persuaded it was the latter.

The design continues to improve, with the different styles, typefaces and layouts adding positively to each story; in fact, it's rather a let-down to turn to the fairly ordinary layout of other fiction magazines after reading *BBR*. The Review and Directory are also rapidly becoming essential reading and it's particularly good to read reviews that don't disappear up their own backsides, all too common a fault in many publications these days. □

From Darick Chamberlin, Seattle

I really enjoyed the reviews and the letters. That Paul Kincaid fella is packin' some heat... geez! He'd probably rip into C-Boy, from the sounds of it. I myself am suspicious of 'experimental' writing (if anyone would believe that)... from the standpoint of wondering the why of it. For me, it is not so much a case of scintillating avant-gardism to bludgeon the reader, but rather an honest display of what I see and feel acutely.

The parts of *Marsfall* that are 'techspeak' are intended to summon the voice of a specialty language, or more precisely, of regular language being put to so specific a purpose as to push away those not intended as receivers. The textual and cognitive input I receive as a contemporary American is by and large almost all advertising and propaganda for the media machine first, then a vast scrolling of language that is meant to tell me something but which refuses to invite or include me (a phone bill, for example!). Only after both of these blasts does a prose or poetic possibility take place.

I am therefore driven somewhat to 'talk back' to the world in the voice it comes to me. Fire with fire. Garble with garble. If someone shows even the slightest interest in *Marsfall* or C-Boy, let me know. I am looking around for participatory situations. The commercial aspect is not urgent right now, really. It is the act of MAKING. □

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With each item receiving a short but objective review, the BBR Directory gives you an ideal starting point for exploring the small press, and for keeping tabs on who exactly is publishing what, and when.

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As well as being one of the small press's most distinctive and enduring voices, **Andrew Darlington** is also an accomplished music journalist, writing for *Rock'n'Reel* among others from his home in West Yorkshire. • **Don Webb** was recently a guest editor of the *Fringeware Review*, and his latest collection – *A Spell for the Fulfillment of Desire* was published by Black Ice Books in 1996. • **Ursula Plug** is a writer and artist from Norwood, Ontario. Over the past ten years her fiction and illustrations have appeared in literary journals, general and arts magazines, and SF anthologies. "The Water Man" first appeared in the Canadian anthology *Tesseract 3*. • Our resident hermit **Uncle River** has slipped over the border from New Mexico into Arizona. The editor and publisher of *Xizquil*, his novel *Thunder Mountain* was published in 1996 by Mother Bird Books. • **Allen Ashley's** fiction has appeared in *Interzone*, *The Third Alternative*, and *The Best Horror from Fantasy Tales*. His short novel *The Planet Suite* is published by TTA Press, for whom he is editing an anthology of millennium stories. • Lancashire's **David Windert** is a professional artist who specialises in comics for younger children, though his work has also appeared in genre-related magazines such as *Kimota*. • Stories and non-fiction by Canadian **Cliff Burns** have appeared in numerous major anthologies, including *The Year's Best Fantasy and Horror*, *In Dreams*, and *Tesseracts*, as well as magazines such as *Space & Time*, *The Silver Web* and *New York Review of Science Fiction*. His most recent collection is *Violins in the Void* from Black Dog Press. • Bradford artist **Anne Stephens** has illustrated stories in previous issues of *Back Brain Recluse*, and experimented with graphic narrative in *Zero Hour*. • Swansea-based Irishman **Mike O'Driscoll** is a familiar name in the British small press, having been widely published in magazines and anthologies such as *The Sun Rises Red*, *Darklands 2*, *Albedo 1* and *The Third Alternative*. • A regular columnist for *Science Fiction Eye*, **Richard Kadrey** previously appeared in *BBR #18*, and is the editor of the *Covert Culture Sourcebook* (St Martin's Press). • For the past decade and more, **Alfred Klosterman** has been one of the USA's most prolific small press artists, with work appearing in magazines across the whole spectrum of the SF/fantasy/horror genre. • A relative newcomer to the small press, **Jill McGroarty** has had several stories in mainstream anthologies as well as fiction in *The Zone*; she lives in Cornwall. • A vegan and hunt saboteur, **Dreyfus** was last spotted in Wolverhampton. • **Peter Finch** was born and lives in Cardiff, where he runs the Oriel Bookshop. A poet, performer, critic and short fiction writer, his publications include *How to Publish Yourself* (Allison & Busby) and *The Poetry Business* (Seren). • **Rik Rawling** is Noel Hannan's partner at 'Bad to the Bone', and has also just launched his own comics magazine called *Hog*. • Best known for his activities within the British Science Fiction Association, **Paul Kincaid** is a well-respected reviewer and critic. He is also the current administrator of the Arthur C. Clarke Award. • **R.V. Branham** last graced our pages in *BBR #21* with "This Is Your Life Kit". Since then he has relocated from LA to Portland, Oregon, where he and his wife Moira continue to work on their respective books. • **Jeff VanderMeer's** short fiction has appeared in over 120 magazines and anthologies in 6 languages in 12 countries. He edits the *Leviathan* fiction anthology, and his novel *Dradin, In Love* was published in 1996 by Buzz City Press. • Even though **Kevin Cullen** once vowed never to get involved with comics, the initial small press writer/artist collaborations set up by Noel Hannan for *Nightfall* have ultimately led Kevin to a career drawing *Judge Dredd* stories for Fleetway. • **Cyril Simsa** is an Anglo-Czech translator, critic and essayist, with a special interest in gender issues and the literature of the fantastic. His translations and articles have appeared in *Yazzyk*, *Fantasy Macabre*, *Ikarie* and *Foundation* among others; by day he works at Prague's Charles University. • The author of *The Steampunk Trilogy*, **Paul Di Filippo** lives in Providence, Rhode Island, and writes regularly for *Science Fiction Eye* and *Asimov's Science Fiction*. □

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